

# The Covenant at Sinai<sup>1</sup>

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## Introduction

Central to the Book of Exodus—and indeed to the entire Pentateuch—is the covenant made between Yahweh and Israel at Sinai comprised in chapters 19-24. The eighteen chapters preceding describe the release of Israel from bondage and slavery in Egypt and the journey through the wilderness to Sinai. Chapters 25-40 are devoted to the construction of a place of worship as the appropriate recognition of the divine kingship established through the covenant.

A much bigger claim, however, can be made for Exodus 19-24. The “Book of the Covenant,” as Moses himself entitles this unit (Exod 24:7), along with the Book of Deuteronomy as an addition or supplement (28:69 MT, 29:01 EVV), forms the heart of the old covenant. And it is in the interpretation of the content and relation of this covenant to the new covenant that is the basis of all the major divisions among Christians—i.e., all denominational differences derive ultimately from different understandings of the relation of the covenant at Sinai to ourselves today.

This brief exposition of Exodus 19-24 bases accurate exposition of this text on (1) closer attention to the larger literary structure, (2) exegesis based on the cultural, historical, and linguistic setting of the text, and (3) consideration of the larger story of scripture (metanarrative) and explicit indications of how this text fits within this larger story. Where and how Exodus 19-24 fits into the larger story of Scripture will be briefly detailed at both beginning and end of the present study—

framing all analysis of the covenant at Sinai as bookends.<sup>2</sup> In between, attention will be given to the literary structure of Exodus 19-24, and afterwards exegesis will be focused on the divine purpose of the covenant in Exod 19:5-6, the first four of the Ten Commandments, and the ceremony of covenant ratification in Exod 24:1-11.

## Exodus 19-24 within the Larger Story of Scripture

The biblical narrative begins with a creator God who is the maker of our world and indeed, the entire universe. We humans are the crowning achievement of his creative work. There is a difference, moreover, between humans and animals, in fact, between us and all other creatures: we alone have been made as the image of this creator God and given special tasks to perform on behalf of the Creator.

According to Gen 1:26-28, the divine image defines human life, both ontologically and functionally, in terms of a covenant relationship with the creator God on the one hand, and with the creation on the other. The former may be captured by the term sonship and is implied by Gen 5:1-3:

By juxtaposing the divine creation of Adam in the image of God and the subsequent human creation of Seth in the image of Adam, the transmission of the image of God through this genealogical line is implied, as well as the link between sonship and the image of God. As Seth is a son of Adam, so Adam is a son of God. Language is being stretched here as a literal son of God is certainly not in view, but nonetheless

the writer is using an analogy to make a point.<sup>3</sup>

The latter relationship, i.e., between humans and the creation, may be reflected in the terms kingship and servanthood. As Randall Garr has shown, it is interesting to note that in the Ninth Century Aramaic Tell Fakhariyeh Inscription, *šalmā'* ("image") refers to the king's majestic power and rule in relation to his subjects, while *d<sup>e</sup>mûthā'* ("likeness") refers to the king's petitionary role and relation to the deity.<sup>4</sup> Thus, the ancient Near Eastern data confirm, correspond to, and illustrate precisely the terms used in the biblical text. Furthermore, as Gen 2:4-25 shows, the Adamic son is like a priest in a garden sanctuary. He must first learn the ways of God in order to exercise the rule of God as God himself would.<sup>5</sup> The biblical narrative, then, is focused at the start on establishing the rule of God through covenant relationship: *kingdom through covenant*.

However, the first humans rebelled against the creator God. As a result, there is chaos, discord, and death in the creation at every level. The destructive path chosen by the first humans led to a downward spiral of corruption and violence until divine intervention was required. God judged the human race by a flood and made a new beginning with Noah and his family. Noah is presented in the narrative as a new Adam. As soon as the dry land appears out of the chaos of the floodwaters, Noah is placed there and commanded to be fruitful and multiply (Gen 9:1); i.e., he is given Adam's commission or mandate. The correspondence to Genesis 1 is striking. Eventually, however, the family of Noah end up in the same chaos and corruption as the family of the first Adam. With the Tower of Babel, the

nations are lost and scattered over the face of the earth.

So, God made another new start, this time with Abraham. Abraham and his family, called Israel, is another Adam, who will be God's true humanity. God makes great promises to Abraham in chapter 12. These promises are enshrined eventually in a covenant made with him and his descendants in chapters 15 and 17. Space permits here only a brief consideration of how God's promises to Abraham carry forward the focus on kingdom through covenant.

The call of Abram in Genesis 12:1-3 consists of two commands (*go* in 12:1 and *be a blessing* in 12:2). Each command is followed by three promises. The first promise is "I will make you into a great nation", and the last promise is "all the clans / families of the earth will be blessed in you" (12:1, 3). We need to pay attention to the terms used here to describe both the people of God and the other peoples of the world. God promises to make Abram into a great *nation*; this is the word *gôy* in Hebrew. The other people groups of the world are called *clans* or *families*; here the Hebrew term is *mišpāhâ*.

First consider the term *gôy* or nation. It is highly unusual for this term to be applied to the people of God. There is in the language of the Old Testament a completely consistent usage: the word *'am* is almost always reserved for Israel. It is a *kinship* term which expresses effectively the closeness of the family/marriage relationship between God and Israel established by the covenant made at Sinai (Exodus 24). On the other hand, the word *gôy* is the standard term for the communities or other societies in the world excluding Israel. So consistent is this use, that when we see something different, we

need to ask why. For example, a few cases are found where the term *gôy* is applied to Israel in a pejorative sense. Sometimes Israel is called “nation” and not “people” because the author may wish to communicate that because of her wickedness she is behaving as if she were not the people of God. Her actions and attitudes indicate she is like those communities who have no special status as the chosen people of God (e.g., Judg 2:20).

Why, then, in Genesis 12 does God speak of Abram becoming a great *gôy* or nation? The basic meaning of *gôy* is an *organized* community of people having *governmental, political, and social structure*. This contrasts with the fact that the other *nations* are derogatorily termed *mišpāḥâ* in Genesis 12. This word refers to an amorphous kin group larger than an extended family and smaller than a tribe.

The background of Genesis 12 is chapters 10 and 11. There we have the history of Babel (Genesis 11), where we see a complete confidence and naïve optimism about human achievement and effort. Man is at the centre of his world, and he can achieve anything. This philosophy comes under divine judgment in Genesis 11 and results in the nations being lost and scattered over the face of the earth (Gen 11:9 and chapter 10). By contrast, Genesis 12 presents us with a political structure brought into being by the word of God, with God at the center and God as the governmental head and rule of that community. In other words, we have the Kingdom of God brought into being by covenant (between God and Abram). The author’s choice of terms emphasizes that the family of Abram is a real kingdom with eternal power and significance, while the so-called kingdoms of this world have no lasting power or significance.

The word in Hellenistic Greek which best conveys this meaning is the term *polis*, normally translated “city.” In our modern world we tend to think of cities as great centers of dense population in contrast to rural areas which by definition are sparsely populated. In the first century, however, in contrast to our culture, the term “city” conveyed the idea of an organized community with governmental headship and appropriate political and social structure—what we normally convey by the English word *state*. Thus, the promises of God to Abraham really did entail the *city of God* as the author to the Hebrews puts it, accurately explaining for his readers the meaning of Genesis 12. Abraham was to go to a country God would indicate to him and reside there—even if as an alien and a stranger: he was awaiting “the city that has foundations, whose architect and builder is God” (Heb 11:10).

Thus, Abraham, and Israel, have inherited an Adamic role.<sup>6</sup> Yahweh refers to the nation as his *son* in Exod 4:22-23. The divine purpose in the covenant established between God and Israel at Sinai is unfolded in Exod 19:3-6. As a kingdom of priests they will function to make the ways of God known to the nations and also bring the nations into a right relationship to God. Israel will display to the rest of the world within its covenant community the kind of relationships, first to God and then to one another and to the physical world, that God intended originally for all of humanity. In fact, through Abraham’s family, God purposes and plans to bring blessing to all the nations of the world. In this way, through the family of Abraham, through Israel, his last Adam, he will bring about a resolution of the sin and death caused by the first Adam.

Since Israel is located geographically on the one and only communications link between the great superpowers of the ancient world (Egypt and Mesopotamia), in this position she will show the nations how to have a right relationship to God, how to treat each other in a truly human way, and how to be faithful stewards of the earth's resources. This is the meaning of Israel's sonship.

The promises of God to Abraham focused on two things: descendants and land. When we come to the books of Exodus through Deuteronomy, which constitute the Mosaic Covenant or Covenant with Israel, we have the fulfillment of these promises. First, God has greatly increased the descendants of Abraham so that they are innumerable, like the sand upon the seashore or the stars of the night sky. Second, he has given the land of Canaan to them.

God's plan and purpose, however, have not changed. He wants to bless the descendants of Abraham and, through them, all the nations. In fact, his plan is to restore his broken and ruined creation through Israel. As they come out of Egypt and before they enter the land, God makes an agreement with Israel. The purpose of this agreement or covenant is to enable them to enjoy the blessings he wants to give them and be the blessing to the other nations. This covenant will show them how to be his true humanity. It will direct, guide, and lead them to have a right relationship with God and a right relationship with everyone else in the covenant community. It will also teach them how to have a right relationship to all the creation, to be good stewards of the earth's resources. We might say, then, that the Mosaic Covenant is given at this time to administer the fulfillment of the

divine promises to Abraham and to the nation as a whole, and through them to the entire world.

### *Excursus: Labelling Covenants*

This article is entitled "the Covenant at Sinai," but what is the biblical terminology? From the point of view of the New Testament—i.e., Latinized English for "new covenant"—it is called the "old covenant" in 2 Cor 3:14 (and compare v. 15). Hebrews 8 and 9 also use the term "first" for this covenant. In the Old Testament, however, it is commonly called the Torah (Law) or the Law of Moses (Exod 24:12).

In Scripture, covenants are normally named according to the human partner. The covenant in Genesis 6-9 is between God and Noah. This is expanded to include his family and, through them, all of humanity. It is fair to call this "the covenant with Noah." The covenant in Genesis 15 and 17 is called the "covenant with Abram" in Gen 15:18. Since it is passed directly on to Isaac and Jacob, it is called the covenant with Isaac and also the covenant with Jacob in Lev 26:42. Later we find the term "the covenant with the fathers" (Deut 4:31) referring to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. We can conveniently and legitimately call it the "covenant with Abram/Abraham." The covenant made at Sinai is simply called "the book of the covenant" in Exod 24:7. In Exod 34:27 this same covenant is with Moses and with Israel. Hence some scholars have called it the Mosaic Covenant. It could just as well be called the Israelite Covenant or Covenant with Israel. In any case, it is never called the Sinai Covenant in Scripture, and it is more in accordance with the pattern of Scripture to name it according to the human partner. Later, when God makes a covenant with David, it is called

just that, his “Covenant with David” (2 Chr 13:5, 21:7, Ps 89:3, Jer 33:21). Finally God makes what is called a “New Covenant” in Jer 31:31.

### The Literary Structure of Exodus 19–24

One of the reasons why both popular and scholarly discussions of the relation between the Old Testament and the New have resulted in a variety of theological disputes is directly due to a failure to consider properly the literary shape of this text. Instead what is foisted upon the text is a framework or structure it does not clearly indicate or possess.

Outline of Exodus 19-40	
(1) The Background	19
(2) The Ten Words	20
(3) The Judgments	21-23
(4) The Ceremony of Covenant Ratification	24
(5) Worship—the Recognition of Divine Kingship	25-40

The broad outline and shape of the text is indicated by headings and the use of specific terms. At the heart of the text are two sections: (1) the “Ten Words” in chapter 20 and (2) the “Judgments” (or “Laws” / “Ordinances”) in chapters 21-23. These are the actual headings in the text. Exodus 20:1 introduces the matter simply: “And God spoke all these words.” While Christians commonly refer to this section as the “Ten Commandments,” the commands which form the basis of the covenant are simply referred to as the “Ten Words” in Exod 34:28 and Deut 4:13, 10:4. The precise expression, “the Ten Commandments” occurs nowhere in the Old Testament, although in a general way the Ten Words are included when reference is made to the commands of Yahweh. They are frequently referred to as commandments in the New Testament (Matthew 5; 19:18, 19;

Mark 10:19; Luke 18:20; Rom 13:9; 7:7, 8; 1 Tim 1:9, 10), and that is why the preferred term today is the Ten Commandments. So, in regard to the structure of the text, first we have “the Words,” then the “Judgments” in chapters 21-23.

However, it is not only the headings but also the contents that clearly distinguish the two sections. The Ten Words are presented as absolute commands or prohibitions, usually in the second person singular. They are general injunctions not related to a specific social situation. They could be described as prescriptive law since no fines or punishments are specified. As an example, “You (singular) shall not steal!” The construction *lô’* + imperfect in Hebrew is durative and non-specific. You shall not steal today, not tomorrow, not this week, not this month, not this year—as a general rule, never. By contrast, the Judgments are presented as case laws. These are court decisions functioning as precedents. They are normally in the format of conditional sentences. Here the fundamental principles embodied in the Ten Words are applied in particular to a specific social context. They could be described as descriptive law since they impose fines and punishments. As an example, Exod 21:28-32 addresses the case where a bull gores a human and looks at whether this was the animal’s habit or not. So chapter 20 and chapters 21-23 constitute specific sections of the covenant simply labelled “the words” and “the Judgments.”

#### Commandments: The Ten Words (Exod 20:1; 34:28; Deut 4:13)

- Absolute commands usually second person singular prohibition
- General injunctions not related to a specific social situation
- Prescriptive law—no fines or punishments mentioned

Ordinances (“Judgments” – KJV; “Laws” – NIV)

- Case decisions, case laws, judicial precedents
- The fundamental principles embodied in the Ten Commandments are applied in particular to a specific social context
- Descriptive law imposing fines and punishments (usually in the form of “if... then” statements or conditional sentences)

These two distinct sections to the covenant are clearly referred to in chapter 24, where the covenant ratification ceremony is described. Carefully note the particular terms used in vv. 1-8 of chapter 24 as follows. Exodus 24:1, according to the clause pattern and the topic, connects and directly follows 20:21 and 22. In vv. 21-26 of chapter 20 and vv. 1-2 of chapter 24 Yahweh speaks to Moses from the cloud on Mt. Sinai and gives instructions concerning altars and who will ascend the mountain for the covenant ratification meal. In 24:3 Moses comes and gives a report to the people: “And Moses came and reported to the people all the words and all the Judgments, and all the people responded with one voice, ‘All the words which Yahweh has spoken we will do.’” Note that Moses reported “all the words” and “all the Judgments.” These two terms clearly refer to the Ten Words in chapter 20:2-17 and the Judgments in chapters 21-23. When the people say, “All the words which Yahweh has spoken we will do,” the term “the words” is an abbreviated form of the expression “all the words and all the Judgments” occurring earlier in the verse. Similarly, in the next verse, 24:4, we read, “And Moses wrote all the words of Yahweh.” Here, again, “the words of Yahweh” is a short way of saying, “the words and the Judgments.”

The shortening of long titles is typical in this culture. Much later, the Hebrew canon, whose full title is “the Law and the Prophets and the Writings” may be simply shortened to “the Law.” For example, Paul states that he is quoting from “the Law” and then cites a passage from Isaiah (1 Cor 14:21). So “Law” must be short for “Law and Prophets.” Alternatively, since “the Judgments” are simply unfolding “the ten words” in practical situations, the expression “the words” in 24:3 and 4 may refer to the whole (words and Judgments) by specifying just “the words.” So the two parts or sections of the covenant are written down by Moses. And this is called “the book of the covenant” in 24:7.

Chapters 19 and 24 form the bookends to this “book of the covenant.” At the beginning, chapter 19 provides the setting in space and time, the divine purpose of the covenant, and the preparation of the people for the revelation of Yahweh at Mt. Sinai. At the end, chapter 24 describes the ceremony of covenant ratification. Following this chapters 25-40 describe the construction of a place of worship showing the proper response to the divine kingship established among the people by means of the covenant.

The shape and structure of Exodus 19-24, then, is clearly marked in the text. Chapters 20-23 constitute “the Book of the Covenant” consisting of “the Words” (chapter 20) and “the Judgments” (chapters 21-23). Chapters 19 and 24 frame the Book of the Covenant as bookends, with chapter 19 providing the background and setting and chapter 24 describing the ceremony of covenant ratification.

As has been noted for some time, the structure of this text is parallel in broad outline to the form and structure of international treaties in the ancient Near

Eastern culture of the fifteenth - thirteenth centuries B.C. Parallels between the Book of Deuteronomy and the Hittite suzerain-vassal treaties are more striking than between the Book of the Covenant in Exodus and the Hittite Treaties, but the parallels are noteworthy nonetheless. International treaties followed a specific form: (1) Preamble (author identification), (2) History of Past Relationship Between the Parties, (3) Basic Stipulation, (4) Detailed Stipulations, (5) Document Clause, (6) Witnesses, (7) Blessings and Curses. A chart portrays how “the Book of the Covenant” broadly conforms to this pattern:

Structure of the Covenant in Exodus		
(1)	Preamble	20:1
(2)	Historical Prologue	20:2
(3)	Stipulations	
	(a) Basic	20:3-17
	(b) Detailed	21-23
(4)	Document Clause	24

Unlike Deuteronomy, the “Blessings and Curses” section is absent here. Nonetheless, the commands are enshrined in what would have been clearly recognized at the time as a covenant or treaty form. The implications of this form for proper theological understanding will be developed later. This much is clear: the covenant is formulated as a suzerain-vassal treaty in order to define God as Father and King, and Israel as obedient son in a relationship of loyal love, obedience, and trust. This is confirmed by the fact that the epiphany on Mount Sinai is heralded by the blowing of a trumpet (Exod 19:16, 19, 20:18), a clear signal in Israel for the accession and coming of a king (2 Sam 15:10; 1 Kgs 1:34, 39, 41; 2 Kgs 9:13).<sup>7</sup> Space permits now only a brief analysis of the divine purpose of the covenant as given in Exodus 19, a summary treatment of

the Ten Words, and a consideration of the ceremony of covenant ratification and its significance before the implications for Christian theology are spelled out.

### **Selected Exegesis of the Covenant at Sinai**

#### *The Divine Purpose of the Covenant (Exod 19:5-6)*

As already stated, chapter 19 provides the background to the Book of the Covenant and acts as a bookend on the opening side of the covenant document. Israel arrives at Mount Sinai in her travels through the desert to the Promised Land. Central to the chapter is the flurry of movement by Moses going up and down the mountain. Three sequences of up and down dominate the section: (1) 19:3 (up) and 19:7 (down), (2) 19:8 (up) and 19:14 (down), and (3) 19:20 (up) and 19:25 (down). These three sequences form the boundaries of three sections within the chapter delimiting (1) the divine purpose of the covenant, (2) the preparation of the people to meet Yahweh and receive his revelation and Torah,<sup>8</sup> and (3) the actual epiphany of God on the mountain. The literary structure of the chapter, then, is as follows:

Literary Structure of Exodus 19		
(1)	The Setting in Time and Space	19:1-2
(2)	The Divine Purpose in the Covenant	19:3-8
(3)	The Human Preparation for the Covenant	19:9-15
(4)	The Revelation of Yahweh at Sinai	19:16-25

The constant ascending and descending provides a vivid portrayal of the distance between the people and God and the need for a mediator. It then emphasizes the miracle of a covenant relationship of love, loyalty, and trust between

parties such as these.<sup>9</sup>

Then Moses went up to God, and the LORD called to him from the mountain and said, "This is what you are to say to the house of Jacob and what you are to tell the people of Israel: 'You yourselves have seen what I did to Egypt, and how I carried you on eagles' wings and brought you to myself. Now if you obey me fully and keep my covenant, then out of all nations you will be my treasured possession, for the whole earth is mine. You will be for me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.' These are the words you are to speak to the Israelites." So Moses went back and summoned the elders of the people and set before them all the words the LORD had commanded him to speak. The people all responded together, "We will do everything the LORD has said." So Moses brought their answer back to the LORD (Exod 19:3-8, NIV).

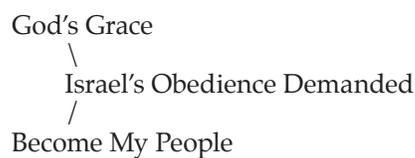
After the place and time in history is specified, vv. 3-8 detail the purpose of the covenant from God's point of view. What we have in these verses is a proposal of the covenant in a nutshell: (1) verse 4 describes the past history of relationship between the two covenant partners, (2) vv. 5-6 propose a relationship of complete loyalty and obedience of Israel as a vassal to Yahweh as the great king and promise certain blessings, and (3) in vv. 7-8 the people agree to the proposal. Thus, even in this covenant proposal in vv. 3-8 the form and structure corresponds to the formula of ancient Near Eastern covenants and treaties.

Verse 4 is a marvellous encapsulation of the past relationship between the people and Yahweh using the imagery of being carried out of trouble on the wings of an eagle: "You yourselves have seen what I did to Egypt, and how I carried you on eagles' wings and brought you to myself." This brief statement summarizes the abject condition of the people

in slavery in Egypt and the signs and wonders performed by Yahweh both in the ten plagues and the crossing of the Red Sea that delivered and freed them from slavery. It also speaks of the way in which God had directed them through the mazes and mirages of the desert using a pillar of cloud by day and of fire by night. This form of leadership also protected them from extreme heat by day and cold by night. Every day bread rained from heaven for their nourishment and water gushed from the rock to satisfy their thirst. Our culture today can picture this from the movie world in the miraculous rescue of Gandalf by the eagles in the *Lord of the Rings*. God had protected the people and provided for them during the difficult desert journey, bearing them on eagles' wings, so to speak, and had so arranged their itinerary as to bring them to himself, that is, to the place already prepared as a meeting place between God and men, to Sinai, the mountain of God (Exod 3:1).

Verses 5-6 are constructed in the form of a conditional sentence: "if you do this ... then you will be ... and you will be..." The protasis or "if clause" specifies absolute obedience to the covenant stipulations. The apodosis or "then clause" defines the result in terms of relationship to Yahweh: they will belong to him in two ways (1) as a king's treasure, and (2) as a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.

Before explaining the meaning of the terms defining the divine goal in the covenant relationship, the relation of vv. 5-6 to v. 4 must be stressed. Perhaps a diagram may be used to picture this:



Verse 4 shows that the motivation for concluding and keeping a covenant with Yahweh is sovereign grace. The creator God has chosen to display favor and kindness to Israel and has acted in history to redeem them and make them his people. A lot of misunderstanding has been caused by comparing the old covenant to the new in terms of “law” and “grace.” This text is clear: the old covenant is based upon grace and grace motivates the keeping of the covenant just as we find in the new covenant. God had protected the people and provided for them during the difficult desert journey, bearing them on eagles’ wings, so to speak, and had so arranged their itinerary as to bring them to himself, that is, to Sinai, the mountain of God. This teaches, then, that the basis for the covenant from the point of view of the human partner was confidence and trust in Yahweh as established by the events of the Exodus and gratitude to Yahweh. What is unlike the new covenant is that covenant keeping depends on Israel’s promise to obey.

Verses 5 and 6, then, describe the purpose, from God’s point of view, for which the covenant was given to the people and the nature of the relationship between God and Israel that will result from ratifying the covenant proposed by Yahweh.

#### *Personal Treasure*

The first purpose of the covenant is that these chosen, redeemed people might become God’s own possession and private treasure. The word in Hebrew that is translated “possession” is the same word used in 1 Chron 29:3 for King David’s own private cache or vault of gold and silver, his personal store of all things precious and valuable.<sup>10</sup> If we were to travel back in time to the ancient Near East, we would

find at capital cities such as Hattusa (Boğazkale, Turkey) and Ugarit (Syria) the rich treasure-vaults of the kings. It is difficult for us to imagine since we have no monarchy such as the monarchs of Europe in the nineteenth century. Perhaps something comparable today would be the Crown Jewels in London. A causal clause<sup>11</sup> explains that the whole world belongs to Yahweh. In one sense, the king is owner or possessor of the entire country, but in addition to this, he may also have a personal treasure. The whole world is like a ring on God’s hand, and his chosen people are the jewel in that ring.

#### *Kingdom of Priests*

Although some expositions consider the meaning of “kingdom of priests” and “holy nation” separately, in a real sense they should be taken together. The text clearly divides the goal of the covenant relationship into two statements. The first is supported by an explanation or reason. A second statement combines the phrases “kingdom of priests” and “holy nation” either as a hendiadys or at least as an expression similar to Hebrew poetry where a pair of parallel lines is employed to consider a topic from two slightly variant but similar viewpoints to create a full-orbed perspective on some proposition. These phrases will be explained here, each in turn, but with the meaning of the other phrase kept in mind.

First, consider the phrase “kingdom of priests” found in this text. The full sentence is “You will belong to me as a kingdom of priests” (*tihyû lî mamleket kôh<sup>n</sup>nîm*). The *lamed* preposition in the phrase *lî* clearly indicates possession.<sup>12</sup> The Hebrew word “kingdom” may refer to the domain or realm which is ruled, or to the exercise of kingly rule and sover-

eignty.<sup>13</sup> The phrase “kingdom of priests,” therefore, could mean a domain of priests whom God rules or, alternatively, the exercise of royal office by those who are in fact priests. It is difficult to decide since the *lamed* preposition suggests the former reading while the term “priests” modifying “kingdom” suggests the latter. The function of a priest is to bring others into the presence of God. Perhaps both meanings are intended so that both the relationship between God and Israel and the relationship between Israel and the world is indicated. The ambiguity serves the theme “kingdom through covenant.”

We see, then, that Israel, the last Adam, will belong to God as a people under his rule and will exercise royal rule by spending time in the worship of God so necessary for the task of ruling for God and under God, and by bringing the nations into the divine presence. They would be a people completely devoted to the service of God. The rite of circumcision as practiced in Israel is an excellent illustration of this. Probably the background for understanding circumcision is Egypt, where only the aristocracy, the highest order of priests and the noblest warriors along with the Pharaoh and his family were circumcised, because only they were completely devoted to the service of the gods.<sup>14</sup> In Deut 10:16 the command to Israel, “circumcise your hearts,” is an exposition of the earlier command “to fear the LORD your God, to walk in all his ways, to love him, to serve the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul, and to observe the LORD’s commands and decrees that I am giving you today for your own good” (NASB). Thus, circumcision is an apt expression for the idea: be completely devoted to Yahweh.

In *Dominion and Dynasty*, Stephen

Dempster analyzes the phrase “kingdom of priests” in a similar way:

The final phrase designates Israel as a particular type of kingdom. Instead of being a kingdom of a particular king, it will be a kingdom marked by priesthood; that is service of God on behalf of people and *vice versa*. It will be “a kingdom run not by politicians depending upon strength and connivance but by priests depending upon faith in Yahweh, a servant nation instead of a ruling nation.” Israel will thus redefine the meaning of dominion—service. This will be its distinctive task, its distinguishing characteristic among the world of nations.<sup>15</sup>

### *Holy Nation*

The parallel phrase to “kingdom of priests” is “holy nation” (*gôy qādôš* in Hebrew). As already mentioned, this phrase is not necessarily identical in meaning to “kingdom of priests” but both phrases function as a pair, like parallel lines in Hebrew poetry to paint a three-dimensional picture in one’s mind.

The term *gôy* or nation is the parallel term to kingdom. It is an economic, political, and social structure in which a final governmental headship operates. It therefore clearly reminds us of Gen 12:2 as explained earlier. This is the City of God, the Kingdom of God. In fulfillment of the promises to Abraham, Israel, by virtue of the Mosaic Covenant, will provide under the direct rule of God a model of God’s rule over human life which is the divine aim for the entire world.

“Nation” is modified by the adjective “holy.” What is a “holy” nation? Unfortunately, the term holy is one that is not very well understood by the church today. Definitions commonly given are “pure” or “set apart.” Such definitions are erroneous because the meaning is determined by etymology rather than usage, and the

etymology is completely speculative. The idea that “holy” means “set apart” can be traced to the influence of Baudissin who proposed in 1878 that the root of “holy” in Hebrew, i.e., *qdš*, is derived from *qd-* “to cut.”<sup>16</sup> Extensive research recently done by a French evangelical scholar, Claude-Bernard Costecalde, has cast better light on the meaning of this term since his analysis was based on the way the word is used rather than on hypothetical origins.<sup>17</sup> Costecalde’s study examined all occurrences in the Old Testament and in ancient Near Eastern literature of the same time (e.g., Akkadian and Ugaritic). Not surprisingly, he discovered that the biblical meaning was similar to that in the languages of the cultures surrounding Israel. The basic meaning is not “separated,” but rather “consecrated to” or “devoted to.” This is also the basic meaning of ἅγιος, the counterpart in Greek.<sup>18</sup>

Noteworthy is the passage in Exodus 3 where Moses encounters Yahweh in the burning bush and is asked to remove his sandals because he is standing on “holy ground.” This is the first instance in the Old Testament of the root *qdš* in either an adjectival or noun form. In the narrative, Moses is commanded to stay away from the bush, from the place from which God speaks, and not from the holy ground. There is nothing inaccessible or set apart about the holy ground. Moreover, his fright and shock come from a revelation of God, and not from the holiness of the place. The “holy ground” (Exod 3:5) encompasses a larger space than just the bush from which God speaks and is equivalent to “the mountain of God” in 3:1. The act of removing one’s sandals, like the act of the nearest relative in Ruth 4:7, is a ceremony or rite of de-possession well-known in the culture of that time. Moses

must acknowledge that this ground belongs to God and enter into an attitude of consecration. Thus, rather than marking an item as set apart, “holy” ground is ground prepared, consecrated, or devoted to the meeting of God and man.

A holy nation, then, is one prepared and consecrated for fellowship with God and one completely devoted to him. Instructions in the Pentateuch are often supported by the statement from Yahweh, “for I am holy.” Such statements show that complete devotion to God on the part of Israel would show itself in two ways: (1) identifying with his ethics and morality, and (2) sharing his concern for the broken in the community. The commands and instructions in Leviticus 19 and 20 are bounded by the claim that Yahweh is holy (19:2; 20:26) and include concern against mistreating the alien and the poor, the blind and the deaf. In the Judgments of the Book of the Covenant, some instructions relate to the oppression of orphans and widows (Exod 22:23). God was concerned about the rights of the slave (e.g., Exod 21:2-11) and the disenfranchised in society. Over the past thirty years, we have heard the strident voice of the feminist, of the anti-nuclear protest, and of the gay-rights movement. But God hears the voice of those who are broken in body, in economy, and in spirit. If we are in covenant relationship with Him, we must, like Him, hear the voice that is too weak to cry out.

God also jealously protects what is devoted to Him. His anger flares when his holiness is violated, as in the case of Uzzah (2 Sam 6:7), who extended his hand to touch the Ark of the Covenant. As also in Psalm 2, when the kings and princes of the earth gather to touch the Anointed of the Lord, he flares out in anger to protect

his King. As in the case of Paul in the New Testament, who in persecuting the church was reaching up to heaven as it were and to shake his rebellious fist at Jesus, the Anointed One (= the Christ), and slap him in the face, and it resulted in his calling himself the chief of sinners (1 Tim 1:15).

Explanation of the terms “personal treasure,” “kingdom of priests,” and “holy nation,” then, shows the goal and purpose for Israel. Although the language is different from that of Gen 1:26-28 and Gen 12:1-3, we can clearly see that the covenant at Sinai achieves and administers in the Iron Age, through the nation as a whole, the purposes of the promises given to Abraham. God is establishing his kingdom through covenant. The covenant entails relationship with God on the one hand and relationship with the world on the other hand. Israel will model to the world what it means to have a relationship with God, what it means to treat each other in a genuinely human way, and how to be good stewards of the earth’s resources. As priests, they will mediate the blessings of God to the world and be used to bring the rest of the world to know God.

Christopher J. H. Wright observes that Exod 19:5-6 has a chiasmic structure as follows:

Now then, if you really obey my voice and keep my covenant,  
 A you will be for me a special personal possession  
 B among all the peoples;  
 B’ for indeed to me belongs the whole earth  
 A’ but you, you will be for me a priestly kingdom and a holy nation.<sup>19</sup>

Wright states,

After the initial conditional clause

(the first line), there is a chiasmic structure of four phrases, in which the two central lines portray God’s universal ownership of the world and its nations, while the two outer lines express his particular role for Israel. This structure also makes clear that the double phrase “priestly kingdom and holy nation” stands in apposition to “personal possession.”... The *status* is to be a special treasured possession. The *role* is to be a priestly and holy community in the midst of the nations.<sup>20</sup>

The literary structure as explained by Wright re-enforces the exposition here of Israel’s covenant relationship with God and with the world that takes up the sonship and kingship of the divine image in Genesis 1.

The new covenant succeeds where the old covenant failed. The purposes of the Mosaic Covenant are now being fulfilled in the church. The Apostle Peter calls the church God’s “special treasure,” a “kingdom of priests,” and a “holy nation” (1 Pet 2:9-10). God has forged both Jews and non-Jews into his new [Adam] humanity according to Eph 2:15.

### *The Ten Words (Exodus 20)*

A brief explanation of the Ten Words will make plain the claim made repeatedly that the Mosaic Covenant entails a right relationship to God and social justice in human relationships. Some general observations on the Ten Words are fundamental to a proper understanding of this Covenant.

The Ten Words form the heart of the covenant between God and Israel at Sinai. The Book of the Covenant, as we have seen, consists of the Ten Words and the Judgments. The former constitute the basic and fundamental requirements of the covenant, the latter are detailed stipulations based on the Ten Words

which apply them in practical ways to specific social situations, and draw out and nuance their meaning in various contingencies and circumstances.

Attention has already been drawn to the fact that the earliest tradition in the biblical text refers to them as the “Ten Words” (Exod 34:28; Deut 4:13; 10:4) and not, e.g., as the “Ten Commandments” as we now know them. There is, in fact, a particular reason for this and for why there are precisely ten instructions. A connection is being made between the covenant at Sinai and the creation. In the creation narrative, God creates the universe by simply speaking, by his word. In the Hebrew Text, the verb *wayyōmer*, “and he [= God] said” occurs ten times. In a very real way, the entire creation depends or hangs upon the word of God. Here, the Book of the Covenant is what forges Israel into a nation. It is her national constitution, so to speak. And it is also Ten Words that brings about the birth of the nation. Like the creation, Israel as a nation hangs upon the Ten Words for her very being.

Although the biblical text tells us that there are Ten Words, Jewish, Catholic and Protestant traditions have differed in enumerating them. This is due in large measure to the fact that the repetition of the Ten Words in Deuteronomy 5 entail some slight variations in the text, doubtless due to further reflection on the part of Moses, and yields, therefore, a different construal of the whole. The focus here is on Exod 20:3-17 where a clear structure in the text divides the Ten Words into four commands defining Israel’s relationship to Yahweh and six commands dealing with human interpersonal relationships within the covenant community. They define a genuinely human way to treat

each other.

Note in particular that a reason or rationale is given for keeping the first four commands introduced by *kî* = “because” or “for” (20:5, 6, 11). One reason is supplied after commands one and two, and one each after the third and fourth commands. This is a hint, structurally, to consider the first four commands in pairs.

No reason or rationale is given for keeping the last six commands. These entail the basic and inalienable rights of every human and have been recognized by the customs and laws of every society.<sup>21</sup> These “laws” can be paralleled in law codes from other societies in the ancient Near East:

Law Codes of the Ancient Near East	
The Laws of Ur-Nammu	2050 B.C.
The Laws of Lipit-Ishtar	1850 B.C.
The Laws of Eshnunna	c. 1800 B.C.
The Code of Hammurapi	c. 1700 B.C.
The Middle Assyrian Laws	c. 1100 B.C.
The Old Hittite Laws	1280 B.C.

Although the Ten Words expresses these laws negatively, they could also be expressed positively in terms in the inalienable rights of every human person:

- Thou shalt not murder = the right of every person to their own life
- Thou shalt not commit adultery = the right of every person to their own home
- Thou shalt not steal = the right of every person to their own property
- Thou shalt not bear false witness = the right of every person to their own reputation

No society can endure that does not respect the basic inalienable rights of every human person. Since the last six commands can be paralleled in the law codes of other societies in the ancient Near East and were well known to the Israelites, no rationale for keeping them

need be supplied in the text. The first four commands, however, as Andrew and Stamm have argued, are unparalleled in the ancient Near East.<sup>22</sup> Certainly the command to worship only one God, the command not to construct or worship idols, and the command to observe the Sabbath are absolutely unique. In fact, the seventh day in Mesopotamia was considered unlucky. These commands constitute a new revelation, and God graciously supplies a rationale for keeping them so that Israel may grasp an adequate motivation for following a practice that was hitherto unprecedented.

The question must also be raised as to why the commands are given as prohibitions and why they are formulated in the Second Person Singular. Why not express them positively as inalienable rights? Why not indicate by a second person plural that they are addressed to all? The reason for this is simple. God wants each and every individual person to think first of the inalienable rights of the other person and not first about their own inalienable rights. This explains both the negative formulation and the second person singular.

Right from the start and all throughout the history of Israel, attempts were made to boil down, digest, and summarize the instructions of the covenant—both the many judgments that elaborate the Ten Words in practical situations as well as the Ten Words themselves. For example, Leviticus 18-20 contains a collection of instructions that develop further in particular the last six of the Ten Words. It is interesting to note that at the mid- and end-points of chapter 19 we find the instruction “You shall love your neighbour as yourself” (vv. 18, 34).<sup>23</sup> Jesus and other rabbis of the first century demon-

strated exegetical insight to observe that this was a summary statement of the various instructions in this section of Leviticus and indeed of the last portion of the Ten Words that they elaborate. Later on, the prophets and poets used two pairs of words as summaries of the Torah. One is the pair “lovingkindness and truth” and another is “justice and righteousness.” Each pair of words is a hendiadys—communicating a single idea through two words. The first pair speaks of faithful loyal love and the second speaks of social justice. These are attempts to boil down the covenant stipulations into a single sound bite. They are important because they show that the instructions represent faithful love as well as social justice in human inter-relationships.

Space permits in this brief treatment of the Mosaic Covenant a short explanation of each of the first four of the Ten Words as these have been more troublesome for Christians to understand than the last six.

#### *First Command: No Other Gods Before Me*

Some scholars and traditions have construed the first of the Ten Words as verses 2 and 3. Yet the fact that the covenant is broadly structured according to a Hittite treaty demonstrates plainly that v. 2, in which Yahweh states, “I am the LORD your God who brought you out from the Land of Egypt, from the house of slaves,” is, in fact, the historical prologue of the treaty so that the first command is just v. 3: “You shall have no other gods before me.” In both Roman Catholic and Lutheran interpretive traditions, the command in v. 3 and the command in v. 4 (“You shall not make for yourself an idol”) are counted as one command while the command against coveting is separated into two:

“you shall not covet your neighbor’s wife” and “you shall not covet your neighbor’s house.” As Bruce Waltke notes, “according to the latter construction, the first commandment condemns false worship and the tenth commandment distinguishes wife from property.”<sup>24</sup>

The interpretation of the Reformers and the creeds following in this tradition construe the text to mean we should not have any other gods before the Lord, i.e., in preference to the Lord. Thus the prohibition is understood in terms of priorities. According to the Westminster Confession, God must be the highest priority in our attitudes, thoughts, words, and ways. Others have interpreted the prohibition philosophically and argued that the main point is to establish absolute monotheism and rule out the existence of other deities.

The command, however, does appear to acknowledge the existence of other gods. In courses taught in the history of religion at universities in the western world, the suggestion is frequently made that at an earlier stage of the history of Israel, the people were henotheists—that is, they believed in the existence of many gods but consciously chose to worship only one. At a later point in the development of Israel’s religion, henotheism gave way to monotheism, i.e., the belief that there *is* only one god.

Bruce Waltke alleviates this problem by distinguishing between religious command and theological statements:

For theological statements of whether other gods exist, we turn to Deuteronomy 4:39: “Acknowledge and take to heart this day that the LORD is God in heaven above and on the earth below. There is no other.” Furthermore, Deuteronomy 32:17-21 identifies idol worship as bowing down to demons. Verse 17 reads,

“They sacrificed to demons, which are not God [*lō’-’ēlōhīm*, “no-God”].” These declarative sentences serve as foundations for theological beliefs and doctrines.

On the other hand, religious commands deal with subjective reality. The truth is, regardless of the existence of other gods, human beings create and worship what is “no-God” (1 Cor. 8:4-8). As stated above, Calvin noted that the human heart is a perpetual idol factory. Thus, rather than tacitly assuming the existence of other gods, the commandment assumes the depravity of the human race to create and worship their own gods. The religious command reflects the reality of the human situation but does not serve as a theological statement. Other passages teach monotheism.<sup>25</sup>

This distinction is extremely helpful, but, nonetheless, assumes the exegesis in terms of priorities is correct. Yet this exegesis is difficult to maintain. As John Walton notes,

the focus on God as the highest priority is as far back as the LXX, which translated the Hebrew *’l pny* (“before me”) with the Greek preposition *plēn*, “except.” However, if Hebrew meant to say “except” there were several ways to do this (e.g., *’ak* or *raq*). Similarly, if the Hebrew had intended to express priority, it could have used language such as that found in Deut 4:12 or Isa 45:21.<sup>26</sup>

In an exhaustive study of the use of the preposition *’l pny*- (“before”) plus personal object in the Hebrew Bible, Walton shows that the meaning is consistently spatial. The linguistic data, then, demand that a spatial sense be considered as the main option.

In the past, students of the text have avoided this interpretation because they could not understand how it could make any sense. Data from the ancient Near Eastern culture now illuminate how a spatial sense is eminently suitable. In the cul-

ture of the ancient Near East at this time, the gods operated within a pantheon, a divine assembly. John Walton argues that the first commandment is distinguishing Yahweh from this common understanding of deity in the ancient world and his analysis is worth citing in full:

[W]hen the first commandment prohibits other gods in the presence of Yahweh, it is ruling out the concept that He operates within a pantheon, a divine assembly, or with a consort. J. Bottéro compares this system to that of a king at the head of the state with his family and functionaries around him operating in a structured hierarchy.<sup>27</sup>

Having this image as background suggests that the Israelites were not to imagine any other gods in the presence of Yahweh. Scholars could have arrived at this meaning by simple lexical study, but without the benefit of the ancient Near Eastern material, the results of the lexical study made no sense to interpreters. Consequently, they devised alternative explanations, even though when the prepositional combination that occurs in the Hebrew text takes a personal object the meaning is consistently spatial. Using comparative cultural information, we have recovered a neglected sense of the text that was there all the time.

In view of the information provided from outside the Bible, this spatial sense gains credibility. In the ancient Near East the gods operated within pantheons and decisions were made in the divine assembly. Furthermore, the principal deities typically had consorts. For the gods life was a community experience. The destinies of the gods were decreed in assembly, as were the destinies of kings, cities, temples and people. The business of the gods was carried out in the presence of other gods. Lowell Handy helpfully summarizes this system as a hierarchy of authoritative deities and active deities.

The highest authority in the pantheon was responsible for ordering and maintaining earth and cosmos but was not

actively engaged in the actual work necessary to maintain the universe. The next lower level of deities performed this function. Serving under the authority of those who actually owned the universe, the active gods were expected to perform in a way that would enable the cosmos to operate smoothly. Each of the gods at this level of the pantheon had a specific sphere of authority over which to exert his or her control. Ideally, all the gods were to perform their duties in a way that would keep the universe functioning perfectly in the manner desired by the highest authority. Yet the gods, like human beings, are portrayed as having weaknesses and rivalries that kept the cosmos from operating smoothly.<sup>28</sup>

Accordingly, by a comparative interpretation of the first commandment the Israelites were not to construe Yahweh as operating within a community of gods. Nor were they to imagine Him functioning as the head of a pantheon surrounded by a divine assembly, or having a consort. In short, He works alone. The concept of a pantheon/divine assembly assumed a distribution of power among many divine beings. The first commandment declared simply and unequivocally that Yahweh's authority was absolute. Divine power was not distributed among other deities or limited by the will of the assembly.

The point of the prohibition of the worship of any other gods "besides" Yahweh was to ensure that Israel's perception of divinity was to be distinct from the peoples around them. This text is readily misunderstood if the interpreter is not aware of the notions being rejected. According to this revised interpretation, the purpose of the first commandment was not simply to promote monolatry; it served the monotheistic agenda another way. Although this text does not explicitly deny the existence of other gods, it does remove them from the presence of Yahweh.

If Yahweh does not share power, authority, or jurisdiction with them, they are not gods in any meaningful sense of the word.<sup>29</sup> Thus, the first commandment does not insist on the non-existence of other gods; only that they are powerless. In so doing it disenfranchises them, not merely by declaring that they should not be worshiped; it leaves them with no status worthy of worship.<sup>30</sup>

In the progressive revealing and unfolding of God in history and Scripture, the completed canon shows that God has revealed himself completely and fully in Jesus Christ. Jesus said, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me." Our lives, our service and work, our worship must recognize his authority alone. This disenfranchises all gods and idols worshipped in our culture. There is no one else for whom I am living my life than for Jesus Christ.

#### *Second Command: No Images / Idols*

The second of the Ten Words is as follows: "You shall not make for yourself an image and form which is in the heaven above and which is in the earth below and which is in the waters under the earth." As John Walton notes, popular prohibition of images has been influenced significantly by four factors: (1) Jewish interpretation, (2) controversies over icons in the Eastern Orthodox tradition, (3) statues of saints in the Roman Catholic tradition, and (4) debate over what constitutes art from a Christian perspective. In classical Jewish and Muslim traditions, the second command led to a prohibition of the representation of any living creature. Christian interpretation up to the nineteenth century was dominated by the idea that since God was invisible and transcendent he could not be contained in an image. Others have spiritualized the text reducing

idols to anything to which we devote our energy, money, and worth as deity.<sup>31</sup>

Such misunderstandings of the second command are due to a couple of factors. First is ignorance of the ancient Near Eastern ideas concerning the nature and role of idols. Walton classifies ancient Near Eastern thinking about idols into three categories.

One category is the manufacture of images. In the ancient Near Eastern mindset, only the god could approve and initiate the manufacturing process. At the end of the process, special ceremonies and rituals, in particular the mouth-opening ritual, allowed the god to inhabit the image and permitted the image to drink, eat food, and smell incense.<sup>32</sup>

A second category concerns the use of the image. Walton notes that "in the ancient world all formal and public worship revolved around the image."<sup>33</sup> Thus the image involved mediation. It mediated revelation from the deity to the people and also mediated worship by the people of the deity as they brought clothes, drink, and food to honour it.

A third category has to do with ancient Near Eastern perceptions concerning the function and nature of images. According to Walton,

as a result of the induction ritual the material image was animated by the divine essence. Therefore, from now on it did not simply represent the deity, but also manifested its presence. However, this does not mean that the image had thereby been deified. The deity was the reality that was embodied in the image.<sup>34</sup>

Misunderstanding of the second command is due not only to ignorance of the ancient Near Eastern culture and worldview, but also to faulty analysis of the grammar of this text. Let us con-

sider closely the exact text of the second of the Ten Words in both Exodus and Deuteronomy. Below the Hebrew text is provided as well as the translations of the KJV and NIV.

Exod 20:4:

לֹא תַעֲשֶׂה-לְךָ פֶסֶל וְכָל-תְּמוּנָה

KJV: Thou shalt not make unto thee any graven image, or any likeness of any thing.

NIV: You shall not make for yourself an idol in the form of anything.

Deut 5:8:

לֹא-תַעֲשֶׂה-לְךָ פֶסֶל כָּל-תְּמוּנָה

KJV: Thou shalt not make thee any graven image, or any likeness of any thing.

NIV: You shall not make for yourself an idol in the form of anything.

The translation of the KJV represents early Jewish rabbinic understanding, no doubt mediated through the Latin Vulgate of Jerome. This is the way orthodox Jews today understand the text and also the way in which Muslims have consistently understood the text. If we believe in the analogy of Scripture, however, where we interpret the unclear by the clear, this cannot be the correct meaning of this text.

The original text in Hebrew actually conjoins the objects of the verb with *waw*, a copulative coordinating conjunction that always means “and.” A series of alternative clauses may be joined by *waw*, but this does not mean that *waw* has the same value as “or” in English.<sup>35</sup> Hebrew does have a conjunction “or,” i.e., *’ô* and it could have been used here to designate the alternative possibility. The text in Exod 20:4 is difficult, but the early rabbinic understanding does not follow the norms of grammar in Hebrew. Note that the parallel text in Deuteronomy does not have the conjunction *waw*, but employs instead a construct phrase: “a carved image / idol of any form.” Certainly the

rendering by “or” is contrary to the syntax here. It seems that interpretive traditions have molded Deut 5:8 to suit their understanding of Exod 20:4.

Given the analogy of Scripture, since the grammar of the text in Deut 5:8 is clearer, a better approach is to use the clearer text to interpret the unclear in Exod 20:4. The construction in Exod 20:4 could be understood as a hendiadys, a common figure of speech in Hebrew literature where one idea is communicated by two nouns or verbs joined by “and.” The first notable example in the Bible is Gen 3:16. The Hebrew text has “I will greatly increase your pain and your pregnancy.” This does not mean an increase of pain on the one hand and pregnancy on the other. The next sentence goes on to explain, “In pain you will bring forth children.” So the earlier expression must mean “pain in pregnancy”—an example of a hendiadys. In Exod 20:4 “a carved image and any form” must, therefore, in the light of Deut 5:8 mean “a carved image/idol in any form.” This is the approach taken by the NIV and is one that accurately follows the grammar of the Hebrew language and uses the clear meaning of one text to assist the interpretation of the other rather than impose the faulty interpretation of Exodus on the clear text in Deuteronomy.

Accurate exegesis of the second command, then, shows that this text has nothing to do with art or the representation of aspects of the created order with images. Rather, the command has to do with images used as mediators of the presence or revelation of deity from god to human or mediation of the worship of people to the deity. As Walton observes, “the prohibition of images excluded in particular that sort of worship that understood cultic rituals to meet the needs of the deity through the image.”<sup>36</sup>

*Third Command: Do Not Misuse the Name of God*

Popular misunderstanding also exists concerning the third of the Ten Words: "You shall not lift up the name of Yahweh your God worthlessly [*laššāw*]." Once again, better knowledge of both cultural setting and linguistic data can improve our understanding of this text.

First, the basic import of this instruction is not related to the use of God's name idly in blasphemy, minced oaths, or profanity. This is certainly inappropriate and respect and reverence for the divine name is enjoined in Deut 28:58.

Second, the traditional view has focused on false oaths, as Bruce Waltke notes:

[T]he operative word is *šāw'* (KJV, "in vain"; cf. Lev. 24:15)... *Šāw'* is used in biblical Hebrew in several ways: to denote to be false or deceitful with respect to speaking (Deut. 5:20 in reference to being a false witness against a neighbour; Exod 23:1 in reference to a false report or rumor); with respect to being false in worship (Isa. 1:13, which discusses a false tribute to God where the people hold to a form of worship, but their heart is not there); and with respect to being false in prophecy (Ezek. 13:3-7, which refers to false prophets who claim to have seen a vision, but there is no reality to what they have seen). Herbert Huffmon argues from both biblical and extrabiblical evidence that the commandment prohibits false or frivolous swearing. "The focus is on not making God an accomplice, as it were to one's falseness, whether of intent or of performance."<sup>37</sup>

Thus, according to analysis of the linguistic data, the command has to do with lifting up the name of God falsely or worthlessly. But this does not provide a full picture.

Third, in order to get a valid under-

standing, the results from the study of the linguistic data must be set within the context of the ancient Near Eastern culture. As Walton points out, this depends upon a careful definition of magic, the world in which the false or proper use of names occurs.<sup>38</sup> In the ancient Near East and also in the Greco-Roman world there was no demarcating line between religion and magic. Later, influence from the medieval church and the Enlightenment resulted in distinguishing the two. In the past, however, interpreters have not appreciated how names were used in the framework of magic and power.

G. Frantz-Szabó offers a comprehensive and helpful definition of magic in the context of invoking supernatural powers:

[Magic] is a reasoned system of techniques for influencing the gods and other supernatural powers that can be taught and learned. ... Magic is a praxis, indeed a science, that through established and for the most part empirical means seeks to alter or maintain earthly circumstances, or even call them forth anew. Magic not only manipulates occult forces but also endeavors to master the higher supernatural power with which religion is concerned.<sup>39</sup>

The name of God represents and sums up his entire character and person. To use that name brings his person and his power into a particular situation. When we use his name for something that is contrary to who he is, contrary to his character, we lift it up to a lie. Walton observes that "the name is equivalent to the identity of the deity, and the divine identity can be commandeered for illicit use. The problem of identity theft is widely recognized today."<sup>40</sup> In Ps 139:19ff. David disassociates himself in the strongest of terms from fellow Israelites who want him to join them in a scheme to murder someone and are

doing this using the name of Yahweh. Misusing the name of God occurs among Christians today when someone says, “the Lord led me to do such and such a thing,” when we know from Scripture that this is not according to the revealed will of God.

#### *Fourth Command: Keep the Sabbath*

The fourth of the Ten Words is a positive injunction to observe the Sabbath. The importance of this injunction is indicated by its length—it is the longest of the Ten Words. For several decades in the twentieth century, scholars attempted to find precursors to the Israelite Sabbath in the nations surrounding them. This effort was entirely unsuccessful. The Hebrew *šabbāt* is not connected to the Babylonian *šabbatu*, which is the fifteenth day of the month. Moreover the seventh, fourteenth, twenty-first, and twenty-eighth days of certain months in the Babylonian calendar were considered unlucky. Nonetheless, the concept of divine rest is well attested in ancient Near Eastern texts and the cultural context can cast great light on interpretation of the fourth command.

Six aspects of the notion of divine rest in the ancient Near East drawn mainly from the great epics such as the Babylonian *Enuma Elish* are delineated by Walton.<sup>41</sup> These can be briefly summarised as follows: (1) in the ancient epics, the divine rest was disturbed by rebellion; (2) divine rest was achieved after conflict; (3) divine rest was achieved after acts of creation establishing order; (4) divine rest was achieved in the temple; (5) divine rest was characterized by ongoing rule and stability; and (6) divine rest was achieved by the gods by creating people to do their work.

There are both similarities and dif-

ferences between the biblical command to observe the Sabbath and the cultural context of the ancient Near East. We need to attend carefully to the linguistic data in the relevant texts. In Exod 20:8-11, the Israelites are commanded to remember the Sabbath Day to consecrate it. In the Old Testament, the notion of remembering is not merely mental recall, it entails acts in space and time based on keeping something at the front of one’s mind. Israel is to consecrate the Sabbath; it is a commemorative event that belongs to Yahweh and is to be devoted to Him. Both humans—free or slaves, citizens or resident aliens—and animals are to cease from the business and labour ordinarily undertaken to provide for our own life and sustenance. It is an act of faith acknowledging Yahweh as the creator and giver of life and as the one who rules our lives.

The biblical viewpoint is fundamentally different from the ancient Near Eastern perspectives, in spite of many parallels on the surface. Walton states,

[I]n the Old Testament people work for their own benefit and provision, rather than to meet the needs of God or to do his work for Him. When commanded to share the rest of God on the Sabbath, it is not to participate in it per se, but to recognize His work of bringing and maintaining order. God’s rest symbolizes His control over the cosmos, which His people recognize whenever they yield to Him the day they could have used to provide for themselves.<sup>42</sup>

On the other hand, the parallel between the ancient Near Eastern building of temples for divine rest and the biblical creation narrative culminating in divine rest is valid. The framework of the account of creation in the Bible strongly suggests that the cosmos is constructed as a sanctuary / temple in which God may take

up His rest.

Discussion of this command brings us right into the middle of the problem of the relationship between the old covenant and the new, a matter which cannot be adequately discussed here. Nonetheless, a few comments on the Sabbath are in order.

First, we must note that the Sabbath was the sign between Yahweh and Israel of the old covenant, as is clearly stated in Exod 31:12-18. Covenants often have a physical sign associated with them. The rainbow was given as a physical sign of God's promise in his covenant with Noah. Circumcision was commanded as a physical sign in the body of every male in Israel as a sign of God's covenant with Abraham. Similarly, the Sabbath is stipulated as a permanent sign between Yahweh and Israel that the creator God who created the world in six days and then rested has consecrated them to himself.

Second, as we compare the old covenant and the new covenant, the self-identity of the people of the Lord in the old covenant was that of children, while the self-identity of the people of the Lord in the new covenant is that of mature adults (Gal 3:24, 25). The external forms and shadows of the old covenant have been done away now that the reality has come in Christ (Col 2:16, 17).

Now of what does the Sabbath speak? Let us notice at once that in the two texts in the Old Testament where we have the Ten Words, the reason given for the Sabbath in one text is different from the reason given in the other text. In Exodus, the reason is given in 20:11. God's work of creation was complete, it was finished; they could add nothing to it. They were invited to enter his rest and enjoy his work. Hebrews applies this notion to the

work of Christ. We cannot do anything to add to the work of Jesus Christ. We are simply to enjoy it.

In Deut 5:15, a different reason is given for the Sabbath. The people of Israel must remember that they were slaves in Egypt and God brought them out of slavery, so they should give their slaves a chance to rest as they do on the Sabbath. Paul, in Col 1:12-14, speaks as do many authors of the New Testament of the work of the Lord Jesus as a new Exodus. Egypt is a picture or symbol of the world; Pharaoh is a symbol of Satan, and their slavery is a symbol of our enslavement to our passion and pride from which Christ has redeemed us in his death on the cross. Jesus is the new Joshua who will lead those people connected to him by the new covenant to enter and enjoy God's Sabbath rest.

### *Summary*

The first four commands in the Ten Words can be construed as two pairs. John Walton's summary is helpful in grasping their function and intent:<sup>43</sup>

Commandments 1 and 2  
Yahweh's mode of operating in the two realms (divine and human):

- Commandment 1 concerns how Yahweh was *not* to be perceived as operating in the divine realm—no distribution of authority to other divinities.
- Commandment 2 concerns how Yahweh was *not* to be perceived as operating in the human realm—no iconographic mediator of his presence, revelation, or worship offered to him.

Commandments 3 and 4  
Yahweh's exercise of power:

- Commandment 3 concerns how Yahweh's power / authority was *not* to be perceived—people were to recognize it by refraining from attempts to control it.

- Commandment 4 concerns how Yahweh's power/authority *was* to be perceived —people were to recognize it by refraining from attempts to control their own lives on the Sabbath.

### ***The Ceremony of Covenant Ratification (Exod 24:1-11)***

Two episodes dominate Exodus 24. The ceremony of covenant ratification is described in vv. 1-11. In vv. 12-18, Moses ascends Mount Sinai to receive instructions on how Israel is to worship God.

The ceremony of covenant ratification is significant for our understanding of the Sinai Covenant. First, Moses reports to the people the Ten Words and the Judgments who, as in Exod 19:7-8, agree to the covenant. Then Moses commits the Words and Judgments to writing in a document referred to in v. 8 as “the Book of the Covenant.” Early in the morning he builds an altar and erects twelve pillars. Presumably the altar represents Yahweh, for we are clearly told that the twelve stone stelae represent the people, i.e., the twelve tribes of Israel. Moses has assistants from the twelve tribes offer burnt offerings and fellowship/peace offerings. Moses collects the blood from the bulls sacrificed and pours half on the altar. Next he reads the Book of the Covenant, and the people vow to obey and practice the covenant stipulations. Then he scatters/tosses the other half of the blood on the people. In reality he may have actually sprinkled the blood on the pillars that represented the people.

Concerning the blood tossed on the people, Bruce Waltke states, “The latter is called the ‘blood of the covenant’ because it effects the covenant relationship by cleansing the recipients from sin.”<sup>44</sup> This interpretation may appear plausible, but

in this instance is not sustained by the evidence from the text. Fellowship offerings can be for an expression of thanksgiving or offered as the result of a vow according to Lev 7:12-18. The latter is appropriate since covenant making entails vows. The offering in Exodus 24 is not specified as a sin or reparation sacrifice, nor is the verb “sprinkled” used as is normal for offerings for sin. The blood is applied to the altar representing Yahweh as well as to the people and certainly he does not need to be cleansed from sin. Instead, the ceremony indicates the meaning. Half of the blood is put on Yahweh and half of the blood is put on the people. In between these two symbolic acts is the reading of the Book of the Covenant and the vow of the people to keep its stipulations. The symbolism is that the one blood joins the two parties.<sup>45</sup> What is most similar to the ceremony of Exodus 24 is a wedding. Two people who are not related by blood are by virtue of the covenant of marriage now closer than any other kin relation. It is by virtue of the covenant at Sinai that Yahweh becomes the *gō’el*, i.e., the nearest relative, and that Israel becomes not just a nation, but a “people,” i.e., a kinship term specifying relationship to the Lord.

This interpretation is confirmed by the fact that a party representing the people ascends the mountain and eats a meal. Examples of eating a communal meal to conclude a covenant are numerous.<sup>46</sup> This ancient Near Eastern and biblical practice is the basis for banquets at weddings today.

### **The Covenant at Sinai within the Larger Story: The Significance of the Form**

The form of the covenant as given in Exodus and Deuteronomy is impor-

tant for a proper understanding of the Mosaic Covenant and foundational for correlating the old covenant with the new. The form and literary structure in both Exodus and Deuteronomy shows the following points:

(1) The Ten Commandments are foundational to the Ordinances and conversely, the Ordinances or Case Laws apply and extend the Ten Commandments in a practical way to all areas of life. Nonetheless, one cannot take the Ten Commandments as “eternal” and the Ordinances as “temporal” for both sections together constitute the agreement or covenant made between God and Israel.

(2) It is common to categorize and classify the laws as (a) moral, (b) civil, and (c) ceremonial, but this classification is foreign to the material and imposed upon it from the outside rather than arising from the material and being clearly marked by the literary structure of the text. In fact, the ceremonial, civil, and moral laws are all mixed together, not only in the Judgments or ordinances, but in the Ten Words as well (the Sabbath may be properly classified as ceremonial). Those who claim the distinction between ceremonial, civil, and moral law do so because they want to affirm that the ceremonial (and in some cases, civil) laws no longer apply but the moral laws are eternal. Unfortunately, John Frame in his new and magisterial work on *The Doctrine of the Christian Life* and Bruce Waltke in his equally magisterial *An Old Testament Theology* perpetuate this tradition.<sup>47</sup> This is an inaccurate representation of Scripture at this point. Exodus 24 clearly indicates that the Book of the Covenant consists of the Ten Words and the Judgments, and this is the Covenant (both Ten Words and Judgments) that Jesus declares he has completely fulfilled

(Matt 5:17) and that Hebrews declares is now made obsolete by the new covenant (Heb 8:13). What we can say to represent accurately the teaching of Scripture is that the righteousness of God codified, enshrined, and encapsulated in the old covenant has not changed and that this same righteousness is now codified and enshrined in the new.<sup>48</sup>

(3) When one compares Exodus and Deuteronomy with contemporary documents from the ancient Near East in both content and form two features are without parallel: (a) In content the biblical documents are identical to ancient Near Eastern law codes, but do not have the form of a law code. (b) In form the biblical documents are identical to ancient Near Eastern covenants or international treaties, but not in content. This is extremely instructive. God desires to rule in the midst of his people as king. He wants to direct, guide, and instruct their lives and lifestyle. Yet he wants to do this in the context of a relationship of love, loyalty, and trust. This is completely different from Greek and Roman law codes or ancient Near Eastern law codes. They represent an impersonal code of conduct binding on all citizens and enforced by penalties from a controlling authority. We should always remember that Torah, by contrast, means personal “instruction” from God as Father and King of his people rather than just “law” so that a term like “covenantal instruction” might be more useful.

Our view of the old covenant is enhanced not only by accurate exegesis which properly attends to the cultural context and language of the text, but also allows the text to inform us of its own literary structure and considers the place of the text in the larger story. The biblical theological framework is especially

important because there we come to see the Ten Commandments not merely as fundamental requirements determining divine-human and human-human relationships as moral principles, but we come to view them as the foundation of true social justice and the basis of what it means to be a son or daughter of God, an Adamic figure, i.e., truly and genuinely human.

## ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup>I am grateful to the following for constructive criticism and proofing of my work: Barbara Gentry, John Meade, and Jason Parry.

<sup>2</sup>The Covenant in Genesis 1-2 and the Covenant with Noah in Genesis 6-9 have been discussed in greater detail in Peter J. Gentry, "Kingdom Through Covenant: Humanity as the Divine Image," *The Southern Baptist Journal of Theology*, 12, no. 1 (2008): 16-42.

<sup>3</sup>S. Dempster, *Dominion and Dynasty: A Biblical Theology of the Hebrew Bible* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2003), 58-59.

<sup>4</sup>W. Randall Garr, "'Image' and 'Likeness' in the Inscription from Tell Fakhariyeh," *Israel Exploration Journal* 50, nos. 3-4 (2003): 227-34.

<sup>5</sup>See Gordon J. Wenham, "Sanctuary Symbolism in the Garden of Eden Story," in *"I Studied Inscriptions from before the Flood"* (ed. R. S. Hess and D. T. Tsumura; Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 1994), 399-404; William J. Dumbrell, *The Search for Order: Biblical Eschatology in Focus* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1994), 24-25; and M. Hutter, "Adam als Gärtner und König (Gen. 2:8, 15)," *Biblische Zeitschrift* 30 (1985): 258-62.

<sup>6</sup>Exod 15:17 shows that Canaan becomes for Israel what the garden sanctuary was

for Adam.

<sup>7</sup>H. Ringgren, "שׂוֹפָר šôpar," in *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament* (15 vols.; ed. G. Johannes Botterweck, Helmer Ringgren, and Heinz-Josef Fabry; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004), 14:541-42.

<sup>8</sup>The Hebrew word *torâ* simply means "direction" or "instruction."

<sup>9</sup>There is a contrast here between the covenant at Sinai and the covenant at Creation. In Eden, the man dwells on the mountain and walks with God without a mediator. I am indebted to John Meade for this insight.

<sup>10</sup>Hebrew *s<sup>e</sup>gullâ* occurs only in Exod 19:5; Deut 7:6; 14:2; 26:18; 1 Chron 29:3; Mal 3:17; Ps 135:4; and Eccl 2:8. All occurrences refer back to Exod 19:5; except 1 Chron 29:3 and Eccl 2:8 which are valuable to show the concrete, ordinary use of the word.

<sup>11</sup>Some would employ the term "explanatory" or "evidential" as the use is not strictly causal. See A. Aejmelaesus, "Function and Interpretation of ׀ in Biblical Hebrew," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 105, no. 2 (1986): 193-209.

<sup>12</sup>See the majestic treatment by E. Jenni, *Die hebräischen Präpositionen, Band 3: Die Präposition Lamed* (Stuttgart: Kolhammer, 2000), 23-25, 54-57, 77.

<sup>13</sup>See F. Brown, S. R. Driver, and C. Briggs, eds., *A Hebrew and English Lexicon of the Old Testament* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1907; repr., 1953).

<sup>14</sup>See John Meade, "The Meaning of Circumcision in Israel: A Proposal for a Transfer of Rite from Egypt to Israel," *Adorare Mente* 1 (Spring 2008): 14-29. Online: <http://adoraremente.sbts.edu>.

<sup>15</sup>Dempster, *Dominion and Dynasty*, 101-02. The quotation is taken from J. I. Durham, *Exodus* (Word Biblical Commentary; Waco, TX: Word, 1987), 263.

- <sup>16</sup>W. W. Baudissin, "Der Begriff der Heiligkeit im Alten Testament" in *Studien zu semitischen Religionsgeschichte* (by W. W. Baudissin; Teil 2; Leipzig: Grunow, 1878), 1-142.
- <sup>17</sup>Claude-Bernard Costecalde, *Aux origines du sacré biblique* (Paris: Letouzey et Ané, 1986). Unfortunately, for North America, this work is in French and, therefore, not widely known in the evangelical world.
- <sup>18</sup>See H. G. Liddell, R. Scott, and H. S. Jones, *A Greek-English Lexicon* (9th ed. with revised supplement; Oxford: Oxford University, 1996), who give as the fundamental meaning, "devoted to the gods."
- <sup>19</sup>Translation by Christopher J. H. Wright in *The Mission of God: Unlocking the Bible's Grand Narrative* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2006), 255.
- <sup>20</sup>*Ibid.*, 255-56 (emphasis in original).
- <sup>21</sup>See C. S. Lewis, *The Abolition of Man* (London: Geoffrey Bles, 1943).
- <sup>22</sup>Johann J. Stamm and Maurice E. Andrew, *The Ten Commandments in Recent Research* (Studies in Biblical Theology; Second Series 2; Naperville, IL: Alec R. Allenson, 1967). I have not carefully researched whether or not the command concerning misuse of the divine name is found in other ancient Near Eastern societies.
- <sup>23</sup>The command means "to provide assistance" or "be useful" to one's neighbor. See A. Malamat, "'You Shall Love Your Neighbour as Yourself': A Case of Misinterpretation," in *Die Hebräische Bibel und ihre zweifache Nachgeschichte: Festschrift für Rolf Rendtorff zum 65. Geburtstag* (ed. E. Blum, C. Macholz, and E. W. Stegemann; Neukirchen: Neukirchner Verlag, 1990), 111-15.
- <sup>24</sup>Bruce K. Waltke, *An Old Testament Theology* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2007), 411. The exposition here shows clearly the difference between "having no other gods before Yahweh" and "not making an idolatrous image" whereas "coveting a neighbor's wife" and "coveting a neighbor's house" are not as distinct notions. Therefore the Jewish and Reformed division is followed here.
- <sup>25</sup>*Ibid.*, 415-16.
- <sup>26</sup>John Walton, "Interpreting the Bible as an Ancient Near Eastern Document," in *Israel: Ancient Kingdom or Late Invention? Archaeology, Ancient Civilizations, and the Bible* (ed. Daniel I. Block; Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 2008), 306.
- <sup>27</sup>J. Bottéro, "Intelligence and the Technical Function of Power: Enki/Ea," in *Mesopotamia: Writing, Reasoning and the Gods* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1992), 232-50; the citation is found on p. 233.
- <sup>28</sup>Lowell Handy, *Among the Host of Heaven* (Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 1994), 97.
- <sup>29</sup>The significance of this notion may be extended if we attach to it the idea that in the ancient Near East something was not considered to exist if it had not been assigned a name, a place, or a function. See discussion in J. Walton, *Ancient Near Eastern Thought and the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2006), 87-97.
- <sup>30</sup>Walton, "Interpreting the Bible as an Ancient Near Eastern Document," 306-309. This is close to the view of Christopher Wright, who says, "The fundamental thrust of the verse is not Yahweh's sole deity, but Yahweh's sole sovereignty over Israel" (*Deuteronomy* [Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1996], 68).
- <sup>31</sup>*Ibid.*, 309-313.
- <sup>32</sup>*Ibid.*
- <sup>33</sup>Walton, "Interpreting the Bible as an Ancient Near Eastern Document," 311.
- <sup>34</sup>*Ibid.*, 312.
- <sup>35</sup>Brown, Driver, and Briggs, *A Hebrew and English Lexicon of the Old Testament*.
- <sup>36</sup>Walton, "Interpreting the Bible as an Ancient Near Eastern Document," 313.
- <sup>37</sup>Waltke, *Old Testament Theology*, 419.
- <sup>38</sup>*Ibid.*, 316.
- <sup>39</sup>G. Frantz-Szabó, "Hittite Witchcraft and Divination," in *Civilizations of the Ancient Near East* (ed. Jack M. Sasson; New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1995), 2007.
- <sup>40</sup>John Walton, "Interpreting the Bible as an Ancient Near Eastern Document," 318.
- <sup>41</sup>*Ibid.*, 319-22.
- <sup>42</sup>*Ibid.*, 322.
- <sup>43</sup>*Ibid.*, 323.
- <sup>44</sup>Bruce K. Waltke, *An Old Testament Theology*, 435.
- <sup>45</sup>Walther Eichrodt, *Theology of the Old Testament* (2 vols.; trans. J. A. Baker; Philadelphia: Westminster, 1961), 1:43, 156-157.
- <sup>46</sup>Examples of a communal meal as a covenant ratification: Gen 31:44, 54; 2 Sam 3:12-13, 20. The accession of a king involved a covenant (2 Sam 3:21; 5:3 = 1 Chr 11:3; Jer 34:8-18) and communal meal as ratification (1

Sam 11:15; 1 Kgs 1:9, 25; 3:15).

<sup>47</sup>John M. Frame, *The Doctrine of the Christian Life* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2008), 213-17. Frame states, “the distinction [moral, ceremonial and civil law in the Westminster Confession] is a good one, in a rough-and-ready way” (213). Later he admits that “the laws of the Pentateuch are not clearly labeled as moral, civil, or ceremonial” (214). In the end, he struggles to provide clear criteria to show what is and what is not applicable for Christians today from the old covenant. Also see Waltke, *Old Testament Theology*, 434, 436.

<sup>48</sup>Waltke does say that the Ten Words are an expression of the character and heart of God (see *Old Testament Theology*, 413), but his approach does not provide a biblical criterion for determining how the old covenant applies to us today. *As a code*, including the Ten Words, it does not apply. The righteousness enshrined in this code, however, is the same that is now enshrined for us in the new covenant.