

## Evotional Exodus 19:1-20:21

What stories do you tell at a dinner party?

The stories we choose to tell define us, not only to others but to ourselves.



Today we are looking at one of two big set pieces in the Old Testament that define Judaism, the stories Jews tell and re-tell about themselves. Stories that are definitive of Judaism. They are the Exodus and Moses receiving the Ten Commandments on Mt Sinai.

Chapter 19 begins with God reminding them that he rescued them from slavery in Egypt.

<sup>4</sup> “You yourselves have seen what I did to Egypt, and how I carried you on eagles’ wings and brought you to myself”

The image of *God as a mother eagle* is most fully described in Deut. 32:10–12: God found Israel “in a desert land, and in the howling waste of the wilderness; he encircled him, he cared for him, he kept him as the apple of his eye. Like an eagle that stirs up its nest, that flutters over its young, spreading out its wings, catching them, bearing them on its pinions.”



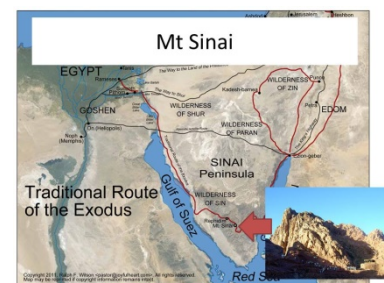
This is a wonderfully gracious image of God as a mother who cares for her young during that time when they are especially vulnerable. They can find refuge from the threats of life under the shadow of her wings. In addition, it is an image of growth and maturation, a time of testing, as the mother eagle seeks to help her young learn to fly for themselves.

She pushes them out of the nest so that they can try their wings, and if they flounder, she swoops down under them and bears them up on her own strong wings.

This is an image of God which is common in the psalms (Ps. 17:8; 36:7; 57:1; 61:4; 63:7; 91:4) and is applied there not simply for the time of youth. God is one whose wings are always available for refuge in time of attack, for shelter from the destructive elements of the environment, and for loving concern at all times.<sup>1</sup>

They have been travelling for three months when they arrive at Mt Sinai. Here two separate events happen. God renews his covenant with them and give Moses the Ten Commandments. These incidents are related but they are *not* the same thing.

We often make the mistake of thinking the covenant is *conditional* upon Israel keeping the Ten Commandments, in essence we mistake the law for a contract.<sup>2</sup>



<sup>1</sup> Interpretation Bible Commentary

<sup>2</sup> The force of the “if” and the conditionality of the covenant have to be carefully stated (see also at 20:5–6; 23:21–22). The issue is not how they might become God’s people; Israel is the elect people already. There is no interest in warning Israel that its status as God’s people will be taken away if it is disobedient. The issue is what the relationship to God entails: *what does it mean to be God’s redeemed people in the world?*

But there is a difference between a contract and a covenant.

A contract can be between strangers. In a contract there is supposed to be a mutually equivalent benefit. If either side fails to keep their side the contract is rendered void.



Yet if this were a contract, the people of Israel agree before they have even received or read the Ten Commandments. It would be a little like signing the contract without reading all the terms and conditions in the small print – something I'm sure none of us have done!

<sup>8</sup>The people all responded together, "We will do everything the Lord has said." So Moses brought their answer back to the Lord.

Why would they do this?

Because they trust God, because they have a relationship with him; he has delivered them from Egypt and therefore is to be trusted.

Remember this is not a contract but a covenant and a covenant is primarily relational.

For example, a marriage is a covenant not a contract. A marriage is primarily relational; the engaged couple become husband and wife. A marriage is weakened if they begin to treat it as a contract.

A covenant is perhaps best thought of as a promise.

God restates the covenant with his people in verses 5 & 6.

Exodus 19:5-6 (TNIV)

"out of all nations you will be my treasured possession. Although the whole earth is mine, <sup>6</sup>you will be for me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation."



Israel is called to be

(1) *God's own possession*, a special group of people from among all the nations belonging to God, and hence people whom God can call on to be the bearer of this purpose (for different formulations, see Deut. 7:6; 14:2; 26:18).

(2) *A kingdom of priests*, that is, "a servant nation instead of a ruling nation" (Durham, p. 263). It is to be devoted as a nation to *a mediatorial role* between God and other kingdoms, to function among the nations as a priest functions in a religious community (see Isa. 61:6). As such, all the people of God, not just the clergy, are to be "committed to the extension throughout the world" of the knowledge of Yahweh. Here is a strike against all forms of clericalism that would claim a special status in the divine economy.

(3) *A holy nation*, that is, a people set apart, not simply *from* other peoples/nations, but *for* a specific purpose. Israel is to embody God's own purposes in the world. The language of nation rather than congregation draws in all aspects of the life of Israel as pertinent to the fulfillment of this purpose, not just the specifically religious.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Interpretation Bible Commentary

Basically, the Israelites are to be a witness and a blessing to other nations.

Viewed in this light the Ten Commandments are then best understood as the way to fulfilling the covenant, how the Israelites are to live in the light of the promise.

The Ten Commandments flow out of the covenant, they do not precede it.

To illustrate this point I came across the following passage in a book by Steve Chalke:

"A few years ago I was taking part in a live debate on the BBC's Radio Five Live, *Drive Time* show. One of the stories the programme was covering was on the issue of adultery. As we chatted the presenter chipped in, "Why is God so miserable? Why has he got such a downer on everything we do?" And then, building into a real anti-God kind of rant, she added, "Don't do this and don't do that. Don't commit adultery. It's pathetic."

I interrupted her with a question.

"Does the Bible really say, 'Don't commit adultery?'"

"Yes, it does," came her rapier reply.

"Well, I've never read that bit," I said.

You know very well it's in there," she retorted. "In fact, it's in there twice. It's one of the Ten Commandments."

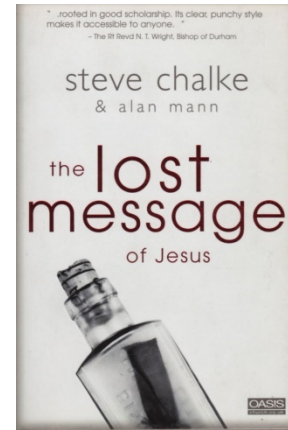
Oh, now I know what you are talking about," I exclaimed. "It's just that I didn't recognize it at first because of the tone of voice you were using."

"What do you mean?" she asked.

"You're absolutely right," I continued. "God does say that we shouldn't commit adultery, but not in the way you've read it. You see, before he gives any of the Ten Commandments he introduces himself as the God who loves Israel. He lets them know that he is for them and not against them. He wants the best for them. God didn't sit in heaven making a list of all the things he knows human beings like to do and then outlaw them all to spoil our fun. Rather he knows the pain and heartache that we will cause others and ourselves if we pursue agendas that are contrary to the way he made us to be. The Ten Commandments is a loving God saying, 'Look, I am the God who loves you. I'm on your side. I got you out of slavery. I'm the best deal you've got going for you Trust me. Don't steal. Don't lie. Don't abandon me. Don't commit adultery, because if you do it will unleash destructive powers that will slowly over-shadow you, destroying you, your families and your society. Trust me. Don't be stupid.'"<sup>4</sup>

It is perhaps understandable that the DJ above made her mistake, because the Ten Commandments are all posed negatively, but within every 'do not' there is an implicit 'do'.

In his book *Just 10*, evangelist J John explores the Ten Commandments, reframing each of them positively in the light of the implied – 'you shall'



<sup>4</sup> pp.52-53, Chalke, Steve, and Mann, Alan, *The Lost Message of Jesus*, Grand Rapids:Zondervan, 2003

So you shall:

1. Find Contentment - "You shalt not covet"
2. Hold to the truth - "You shalt not bear false witness against your neighbour"
3. Prosper with a clear conscience - "You shalt not steal"
4. 'Affair-proof' your relationships - "You shalt not commit adultery"
5. Manage your anger - "You shalt not kill"
6. Keep the peace with your parents - "Honour your father and your mother"
7. Catch your breath - "Remember the Sabbath day, to keep it holy"
8. Take God seriously - "You shall not take the name of the Lord your God in vain!"
9. Know God - "You shall not make for yourself a carved image, or any likeness"
10. Live by Priorities - "You shall have no other gods before me"<sup>5</sup>

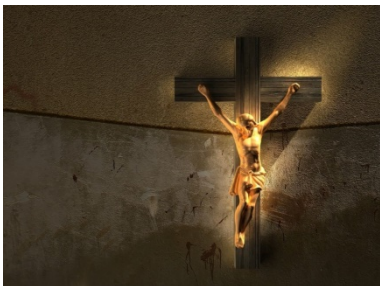
This is how you are to show your chosen-ness, your priestly quality, your holiness.

The problem is that the Israelites weren't very good at keeping holy. They would strive and fail. They would sin and fail. Yet God is faithful and keeps his promise, he doesn't void the covenant.

God sends the prophets to call the people of Israel back to the covenant, but they do not listen.

Until eventually we come to Jesus and the New Testament.

A new covenant is needed...



So God sends Jesus to take on human flesh, to live and to die, and with his death on the cross he brings with him a new covenant - a covenant in his blood.

God fulfilling both sides, the human and the divine, salvation is no longer found by living right (impossible) or by making sacrifices when we sin (inevitable).

The old is not cancelled or done away with, the Ten Commandments are still a good way to live, godly advice.

<sup>17</sup> 'Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfil them.

But the old covenant and the law is fulfilled in Jesus. The striving and failing to keep holy is done away with. By the new covenant in his blood, by his death on the cross, we are made righteous, declared holy.

So how do we access this new covenant? How do we live in the light of the new?

By *Grace* through *Faith*.

No more striving; believe, be baptised, share in communion - this expression of faith is how we participate in the new covenant.

<sup>25</sup> In the same way, after supper he took the cup, saying, 'This cup is the new covenant in my blood; do this, whenever you drink it, in remembrance of me.'

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<sup>5</sup> J John, Just 10

What stories do we, as Christians, tell to define us?

Every time we meet around the communion table to remember Jesus' death on the cross. Every time we retell the story to others we remind ourselves of the new covenant and by faith we become participants in it - it shapes and defines us.

### **Five (or so) Reflection Questions**

1. What stories do you tell and retell about yourself? What does this story say about you? To others and to yourself?
2. Is the image of God as an Eagle helpful? What other biblical images for God do you find helpful?
3. Discuss the idea of contract vs covenant. In the past, have you had a legalistic, contractual view of your relationship with God? How does the understanding of covenant relationship challenge this?
4. A chosen people, a kingdom of priests, a holy nation – was this just for the nation of Israel, or is this still a challenge to us?
5. Did the quote from Steve Chalke challenge or change your perception of the Ten Commandments?
6. Read through J John's restatement of the Ten Commandments in the positive, which ones work well for you? Do any work less well?
7. How good are you at accepting the New Covenant in Jesus? By Grace through Faith, or by works through striving?