

A Covenant for the Freed
Men's Bible Study at Park View
September 13, 2005

Scripture texts: Exodus 6:2-9; 13:3-10; 15:1-18; 20:1-2

The Ten Commandments are best understood when they are studied in the context in which they were first given. In today's study, we will review the drama of God's deliverance of the Hebrew slaves from Egypt. This background will help us to understand the Ten Commandments as a Covenant for the Freed.

All of the readings for today's study come from the book of Exodus. The book is so named because it tells the story of the *exodus* of God's people from the land of Egypt. No event in Hebrew history has greater significance than this occasion in which God delivered the Israelites from Egypt with the power of signs and wonders. The Hebrew people have continuously celebrated this deliverance for thousands of years by means of the annual Passover feast. God's deliverance of the slaves confirmed that he had indeed remembered the covenant he had made more than four hundred years earlier – the covenant to multiply Abraham's descendants to bless all the peoples of the earth (Genesis 12:3).

The liberation of Abraham's descendants from Egypt's house of slavery forms the backdrop of the covenant that God made with them at Mount Sinai. The Ten Commandments, then, are a covenant between God and the people whom he had freed from the house of slavery (Exodus 20:2). The commandments formed the basis of the covenant relationship between a loving, liberating, merciful God and the people that he had just freed from centuries of bondage. The commandments are in essence a covenant of and for the freed.

The people who came to Mount Sinai knew little about self-government and even less about corporate or political sovereignty. They had little sense of peoplehood or community. They had only the dominant Pharaoh and the animistic worship in Egypt as models of government and religion. They had to build a society from the ground up. They set out to build a society around the worship of Yahweh, their great deliverer. The Ten Commandments formed the spiritual, moral and civil foundation on which they could begin to build a nation of their own.

Therefore, it is more accurate to see the Ten Commandments as the moral and spiritual philosophy of the Israelite community than as a legalistic set of laws. This covenant formed the ethical code by which people could live freely in community. By adherence to this covenant, they could escape the chaos that threatens any society when its citizens pursue their own pleasures without regard for the God that created them. In time, some of God's people viewed the covenant as a threat to their freedom. But it was delivered as a confirmation of their freedom under the gracious hand of God.

Whenever the Israelite people repeated the Ten Commandments, they began with the words – “I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery.” These words reminded each new generation that God had rescued their people from a bitter past and promised them a glorious future.

The covenant of law was not given to the people *before* they were delivered from slavery, but *afterward*. It was not given as a *condition* of their delivery, but rather as an *opportunity* to express gratitude and obedience to the one who had accomplished that delivery for them. The covenant set forth the *responsibility* to live as free people, subject to the living God in whom they had placed their trust.

While the covenant was made between God and the nation as a whole, the commandments would of necessity need to be lived out by individuals. Without individuals to take responsibility, the community could not be free. Therefore, the Ten Commandments comprised very specific, concrete commands for individuals. These commands drew clear boundaries around the unending search for self-gratification which at the same time motivates humankind and plunges society into chaos.

The thunder and lighting that accompanied the delivery of the covenant speaks well to the seriousness of God’s intent to call a people for his own name. Upon reflection of Israelites experience of the covenant made at Mount Sinai, the writer to the Hebrews warned that “it is a dreadful thing to fall into the hands of the living God” (Hebrews 10:31).

While the Ten Commandments may be seen as a natural civil code that applies to all people regardless of their religion, they apply most particularly to people who call upon the name of God as Savior and Liberator. They were given as a covenant for people living under the ultimate sovereignty of a living, loving -- and at times -- terrifying God.

Questions to ponder:

Imagine yourself as a group of slaves who had just been freed from many years of bondage. What challenges would you face as you headed out for a land of your own?

Consider the idea that the Ten Commandments were given to people as a covenant *after* they were freed, not *before*. How does this affect the way that you think about God?

What ideas in today’s lesson call for further study or explanation?