

Meeting God: a Celebration of Covenant

Men's Bible Study at Park View

September 27, 2005

Scripture texts: Exodus 19:1-23; 24:1-18; Deuteronomy 5:1-4; 9:9-11

We tend to think of the Ten Commandments as a list of individual laws. But that is not how they are depicted in the scripture. Rather, they are shown to be a covenant, an overarching agreement between God and his people. In the same way that God had once made a covenant with Noah and later with Abraham, God made a covenant with the people that he redeemed from Egypt. Therefore, the focus of this study is to learn how the context in which God delivered the covenant helped to define its meaning, both for the people of Israel and for us.

In both Exodus and Deuteronomy we are given a description of the context for the delivery of the Ten Words. It was a solemn affair that required a time of preparation. It was accompanied by awesome signs of God's presence. It was celebrated by the sprinkling of blood and a covenant meal.

In the scriptures, the word "covenant" is used to describe a relationship between two parties. For example, it is used to describe a relationship between two people, between God and the king (Psalm 89:3), between heads of state (1 Kings 5:12), or between a king and his subjects (2 Samuel 5:3). The most familiar covenant is between husband and wife (Ezekiel 16:8). It is used as a metaphor to describe the relationship between God and Israel. After the people of Israel were taken into captivity, the prophets Jeremiah (11:1-8) and Ezekiel (16:59-63) blamed their terrible condition on their breaking of the covenant with God. Jeremiah prophesied of a new covenant that was to come (31:31-34).

It is reasonable, then, to think of the Ten Commandments as a covenant. All of the other laws and regulations in the Torah flowed from or were related to this covenant of law made at Mount Sinai. In gratitude for God's deliverance from slavery, the Israelites freely agreed to make this covenant with God. Twice the people promised to do all that the Lord had said (Exodus 19:8; 24:3). But Exodus 32 describes in some detail how Aaron led the people in breaking this covenant through the worship of the golden calf.

Viewing the Ten Commandments as a covenant is important because both Old and New Testaments refer to them that way. G. Campbell Morgan emphasized the unity of the Ten Commandments. He taught that they are not ten separate commandments, but "ten sides of the one law of God."¹ p. 11).

In a way, the Ten Commandments functioned as a constitution for the people of Israel. They defined the terms and conditions of the Covenant between God and the people. Yet each of the Ten Commandments needs further definition. For example, when the people were told: "Do not murder," they might ask: Is there a difference between a

¹ *The Ten Commandments*, Fleming Revell Company, 1901, p. 11

murder and an accidental killing? (see Deuteronomy 19:4). (Is there a difference between murder and killing in a “holy war?” (see Deuteronomy 20:12-13). In the case of the commandment not to murder, the covenant named a principle but the laws of the Torah provided further detail. Might this be the case in some sense with each of the 613 laws of the Torah?

Brian Haggerty² has summarized some of the differences between covenant and law as follows:

“Covenant creates a new community relationship.

Law regulates existing relationships and serves to maintain the social order.

Covenant is based on gratitude for past benevolence.

Law is based on fear evoked by the threat of force.

Covenant is accepted voluntarily by each individual; acceptance is often expressed through oath.

Law is imposed by legitimate social authority on each individual in society and is binding regardless of the individual’s attitude.

Covenant binds each member without regard for social or territorial boundaries.

Law binds only those within the social and territorial boundaries.

Covenant is enforced by transcendent powers that are beyond human control.

Law is enforced by the appropriate agencies of society.

Covenant points primarily toward the future; it is a promise regarding future behavior that makes conduct predictable and provides security in private and public life.

Law points primarily to the past; it is based on the accumulated experience of society and operates to secure public order only when a violation takes place.”

Questions to ponder:

What is your most memorable experience of witnessing (or participating in) the making of a covenant? How, if at all, was God involved?

If you were called to participate in a solemn covenant initiated by God, what steps would you take in preparation? If you anticipated meeting God face to face, how would you dress? What would you say?

Which of the ideas in today’s lesson call for further study or explanation?

² *Out of the House of Slavery*, Paulist Press, 1978, pp. 16-17