

EXODUS 19-24

DIVINE PRESENCE: HOLINESS & TORAH

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FORM & STRUCTURE

Exodus 19 begins the heart of the second great movement of the book. The first fifteen chapters form a coherent narrative of the LORD's self-revelation to Moses and Israel for the purpose of redeeming the people from slavery in Egypt. That movement reaches its climax in the Song of the Sea (Exod 15:1–19[20–21]), where Israel recalls the mighty deeds of the LORD and sings praise to their God. The wilderness narratives of Exodus 15–18 serve as a transition, preparing Israel for their encounter with the LORD at Mount Sinai. In Exodus 19, Israel finally arrives at Sinai—the site of their greatest theophany—where the LORD's presence will be revealed in glory, law, and covenant, and where Israel will take the next step in its relationship with the LORD.

It is through their encounter at Sinai that the people of Israel first enter into a covenant. It is at Sinai that Israel first enters into a covenant relationship with the LORD. Like the covenant with Abraham, the Sinai covenant signifies that Israel has been chosen and that the LORD will dwell with them. With the revelation at Sinai, the book's central theme shifts from God's power to God's holiness. The remainder of Exodus will explore how a holy God can dwell with an unholy people. William Propp rightly suggests that Exodus asks the question, "How can Israel abide in relationship with the transcendent Deity, whose full essence the earth cannot bear?"¹ The opening chapters of Exodus set up this question, and the rest of the book seeks to answer it.

The answer, in short, is that God can dwell with Israel because of the moral and cultic statutes mediated through Moses—commandments that form Israel's pathway to holiness. For the authors of Exodus, adherence to the covenant means not only knowing the LORD revealed in glory but also living according to the commands of covenant life. Knowledge of God's presence and obedience to God's law belong together. As Mark Scarlata observes, "Law without Divine

¹ Propp, *Exodus 19-40*, AB: 2006.

Presence can calcify into rigid legalism, and Divine Presence without law can blur into obscure mysticism.”²

The statutes and commandments established at Sinai were intended as signs of Israel’s election. They were not merely instruments of divine control, nor were they simply civil regulations like those of neighboring nations. Rather, they set Israel apart and opened the possibility of living with the holiness of the LORD. The law is not a burdensome obligation but a merciful act of redemption, arising from divine grace and holiness, teaching Israel how to live according to the rhythms of the LORD of creation—patterns of justice, mercy, purity, and holiness that would serve as a witness to the nations. Even as the law was applied in new contexts, the Mosaic covenant given at Sinai remained the core standard by which Israel was measured in every generation.

A brief literary analysis of Exodus 19–24 reveals a blend of legal code and plot-driven narrative. The purpose of the legal material has already been noted and will be explored further. The narrative itself, however, presents a somewhat repetitive and blurred plot structure. This is partly due to the weaving together of multiple traditions, but the final form also creates a sense in which historical and mystical elements intertwine. Space and time become hazy: Moses ascends and descends the mountain repeatedly, yet it is often unclear whether he is above or below. Time markers appear—the third month, two days of preparation, forty days on the mountain—but they are vague, contributing to a sense of timelessness. Something new is happening that transcends ordinary time and place, something that will extend into the promised land and into generations yet to come. Israel’s “great pause” at Sinai, as Gerhard von Rad calls it, marks the culmination of Israel’s entrance into a covenant that is itself timeless.

THE PREAMBLE (Exodus 19:1-25)

Exodus 19 functions as the preamble to the covenant itself. The chapter opens with a historical summary that echoes the structure of ancient suzerain-vassal treaties from Mesopotamia. Verse 4 reads:

“You have seen what I did to the Egyptians, and how I bore you on eagles’ wings and brought you to myself.” (Ex. 19:4, *NRSV*)

² Scarlata, *Abiding Presence*, 148.

This is an ancient creedal formula in which Israel recalls God's benevolent acts as the foundation of covenant life. The emphatic "you have seen" underscores the firsthand witness of the wilderness generation, whose testimony later generations will inherit. The focus is on what the LORD did to the Egyptians and for the Israelites—redeeming them from bondage, defeating the oppressor. God is presented as the warrior God who defeated the Egyptian king and brought justice to the oppressed; and, God is shown to be a nurturing God, the soaring eagle delivering her children from harm. Story and law are inseparable: Israel's obedience flows from thanksgiving as they remember their redemption and anticipate their future salvation in the land. Their narrative identity shapes their commitment to the law. This is reflected, for example, in Israel's unique laws concerning the vulnerable and oppressed, especially the treatment of strangers and aliens—distinct among the cultures of Mesopotamia, Egypt, and Asia Minor.

After the foundation statement comes the heart of Israel's identification as God's covenant people:

"Now therefore, if you obey my voice and keep my covenant, you shall be my treasured possession out of all the peoples. Indeed, the whole earth is mine." (Ex. 19:5)

The term *segullah*, "treasured possession," describes a beloved servant with special legal status in the eyes of a king. Here it is set within the scope of God's universal rule: although the whole earth belongs to the LORD, God chooses one people to be uniquely consecrated.

Having established the why (v. 4) and the what (v. 5), the text now reveals the how—Israel's vocation:

"You shall be for me a priestly kingdom and a holy nation." (Ex. 19:6a)

Israel is called to be holy. The Hebrew root *qadash* is difficult to translate fully, but in its broad field of meaning it always conveys consecration or being set apart. Applied to the LORD, it signifies utter otherness in relation to the creation; applied to Israel, it means remaining in the LORD's presence and deriving holiness from that relationship.

Israel is also called to be a "priestly kingdom." This describes the purpose of their consecration. In the ancient world, priests served as mediators between divinity and humanity, bearing the divine word and presenting human needs before the gods. Priests were a bridge between the sacred and the profane. In Exodus 19:6, this role is astonishingly democratized: all Israel, not a select few, is invested with priestly responsibility. Even more striking, Israel's priesthood is exercised on behalf of the whole world. Israel is called to reflect divine holiness to the nations and to mediate the world's needs before God.

Exodus 19:4–6 is therefore key to understanding the covenant and its accompanying commands. These verses establish the paradigm for covenant life in every generation. Israel first recalls its bondage and the LORD’s mighty deliverance; only then can the people understand themselves as God’s treasured possession. And in that self-understanding, they bear the responsibility of channeling holiness and blessing to the world.³

The people’s response in Exodus 19:8—“Everything that the LORD has spoken we will do”—anticipates the covenant-ratification rituals in Exodus 24, including the sprinkling of blood and the covenant meal. The literary shape of Exodus 19–24 emphasizes Israel’s full acceptance of the covenant and wholehearted embrace of the LORD’s ordinances for their vocation as priestly bearers of divine holiness.

The description of Sinai occupies the remainder of chapter 19, presenting the divine descent through symbolic language filled with majesty, awe, and terror. The vivid portrayal is unlike any other Old Testament theophany—a gripping depiction of what it means for the divine presence to descend upon the earth. At the crescendo, Moses speaks and God answers in the *qol*—a word that can mean “thunder” or “voice.” The imagery parallels other ancient Near Eastern theophanies, yet Israel’s encounter is unique because of Israel’s distinctive calling. The magnificent display at the end of chapter 19 is only a foretaste, a prelude to the next step in Israel’s priestly and holy vocation: the reception of the Decalogue.

THE DECALOGUE (Exodus 20:1-21)

Exodus 20:1–21 contains what are commonly called the “Ten Commandments.” In the Hebrew text of Exodus 20 they are simply *dēbarîm* (“the words”), while elsewhere they are called *‘ăšeret ha-dēbarîm* (“the ten words”; Exod 34:28; Deut 4:13; 5:1; 10:4). The Greek Old Testament translates this phrase as *deka logoi* (“the ten words”), from which the term “Decalogue” is derived. For consistency and accuracy, “Decalogue” is preferred.

Although modern questions remain about the ordering and numbering of the Decalogue, the Old Testament clearly attests to a tradition of ten. Exodus 34:28 and Deuteronomy 4:13 affirm this number, and multiple passages describe the words as etched on two stone tablets and deposited in the ark (Exod 31:18; 34:1, 4; Deut 4:13; 5:22; 9:10). None of these texts, however, specify how the tablets were divided. Since ancient Mesopotamian treaties were often written in duplicate—one copy for each party—it is possible that all ten words appeared on both tablets. Regardless of the physical division, the Decalogue itself divides naturally along theological lines. The first four words concern the vertical axis, the relationship between the

³ This provides a profound point of reflection for the Christian church as the author of First Peter has chosen to describe those under the new covenant with similar words. See 1 Pet. 2:1-10.

LORD and Israel, and are specific to Israel's worship and life. The final six concern human relationships and apply universally. The fifth word, honoring one's parents (Exod 20:12a), serves as a bridge between the two axes.

The Old Testament preserves two versions of the Decalogue: Exodus 20 and Deuteronomy 5, the latter being Moses's repetition of the words before Israel enters the land. While the precise dating of the Decalogue remains uncertain, the Exodus version is almost certainly earlier. It likely reflects a very early Israelite legal tradition, perhaps even predating the Sinai narrative. Even if not quite that ancient, the Decalogue is an early summary code that aligns with general moral principles found in other regional cultures, including the codes of Ur-Nammu and Hammurabi. Yet two features distinguish the Israelite code from its neighbors: it alone insists on worshiping one god, and it alone specifies one specific weekly day—the Sabbath—as set apart.

The Decalogue cannot be considered “laws” in the modern sense. Rather than legal statutes, they function as expectations for living within the divinely ordered world. For Israel to be holy and priestly, the people must be attuned to the order of creation, especially the way humanity was made to live in relationship with the LORD and with one another. At its heart, the Decalogue is a pathway for living in holy relationship—producing harmony with God, within the clan and tribe, and among nations. It is a pathway essential to Israel's survival, protection, and salvation as they enter the land.

One God (Exodus 20:3)

The Decalogue begins with an introductory formula:

“Then God spoke all these words. ‘I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery.’” (Ex 20:1-2).

The Decalogue begins with the an introductory formula. The formula immediately attends to the presence of God speaking to Israel. Exodus 20:2 is brief, memorable, and creedal in tone—an ancient confessional statement that recalls the central truth of Israel's faith: the LORD has redeemed them from slavery in Egypt. Everything that follows in the Decalogue and the subsequent statutes rests on this historical and theological foundation.

The first “word” of the Decalogue is a sweeping and unparalleled statement in the religious landscape of the ancient Near East. The worship of multiple gods—or at least the acknowledgment of their existence—was a basic assumption of ancient religion. The command, “You shall have no other gods before me” (Exod 20:3), can be read within the framework of henotheism or monolatry, since exclusive worship necessarily implies the existence of other deities. Yet the demand for singular devotion is unmistakable.⁴ It is doubtful that Israel had

⁴ See Richard Friedman, *The Exodus*.

embraced philosophical monotheism at this early stage, but the practice of exclusive worship is ancient and becomes the defining mark of Israel's identity among its neighbors. Over time, this exclusivity develops into explicit monotheism, a theme that permeates the remainder of the Old Testament.

For Israel to be a holy nation requires singular devotion to the one true God. Holiness is inseparable from remaining in the LORD's presence, and the first word of the Decalogue establishes that relationship. The LORD of creation—who alone is holy—calls Israel to fidelity, consecration, and undivided allegiance. The command is not merely a prohibition but a declaration of identity: Israel belongs to the LORD alone, and their holiness depends on abiding in that singular presence.

No Idols (Exodus 20:4-6)

The second “word” of the Decalogue—“You shall not make for yourself an idol” (Exod 20:4)—deepens Israel's exclusive relationship with the LORD by forbidding any physical representation that might be bowed down to or used as a conduit to other gods. The Hebrew *pesel* (“idol” or “image”) refers to any carved or cast figure made of wood, stone, or metal representing something in creation. Among Israel's neighbors, such images were central to worship because the deity was believed to inhabit the idol itself. Elaborate rituals were often performed to entice the god to enter the image. At issue in the making and use of idols is control: if a god inhabits an object, whoever possesses the object possesses access to the god. Israel's relationship with the LORD must be fundamentally different. They are forbidden to worship the LORD as though the divine presence could be contained, manipulated, or domesticated.

The text explains the prohibition by describing God as *'ēl qannā'*, “a jealous God.” In this context, “jealous” should not be understood primarily as suspicion of infidelity, though covenantal loyalty is certainly in view. Rather, *qannā'* expresses God's passion and zeal—a covenant love that burns for the people and a divine desire that they share in God's holiness. The language of blessing and punishment must be read within the framework of ancient family structure at the core of society. In a household where three or four generations lived together, idolatry by one member naturally affected the entire family, hence the phrase “to the third and fourth generation.” By contrast, the “thousandth generation” signifies eternity. The rewards of remaining in God's presence and seeking divine holiness endure forever, guaranteed by God's steadfast faithfulness. Infidelity carries consequences, but later biblical authors make clear that God's justice is always accompanied by mercy and the willingness to forgive those who repent.

The second word thus reinforces the first: Israel's holiness depends on remaining in the LORD's presence without attempting to confine or control that presence. Exclusive devotion requires

exclusive worship, and exclusive worship requires rejecting any physical representation that might distort or diminish the reality of the living God.

Honor God's Name (Exodus 20:7)

The third “word” of the Decalogue—“You shall not make wrongful use of the name of the LORD your God” (Exod 20:7)—continues along the vertical axis of Israel’s relationship with the LORD. In the ancient world, invoking a deity’s name in an oath created a binding social and legal obligation. To break such an oath was to invite divine retribution, not only upon the individual but potentially upon the entire community. To “make wrongful use” of the LORD’s name, therefore, means to treat the name lightly or frivolously—precisely the opposite of what the LORD’s glory demands.

The command does not forbid Israel from swearing by God’s name altogether. Rather, it insists that when Israel does invoke the divine name, they must honor the oath fully. The name of the LORD is not a tool for manipulation or deceit; it is the expression of God’s presence, character, and authority. To misuse the name is to misrepresent the God who redeemed them and to diminish the LORD’s glory among the nations. The third word thus reinforces the covenantal seriousness of Israel’s relationship with the LORD: their speech, like their worship, must reflect the holiness of the God who has called them.

Remember the Sabbath (Exodus 20:8-11)

The fourth “word” of the Decalogue introduces the expectation of Sabbath rest, a practice that set Israel apart from all other nations. Most cultures of the ancient world observed cycles of festivals and worship tied to lunar and solar calendars, but no other society designated a single day of the week as sacred, nor did any prohibit work as part of the natural rhythm of life. Israel’s weekly Sabbath was therefore unique—a sign of their distinct identity and their relationship with the LORD.

Israel first learned the practice of resting one day in seven during the manna episode in the wilderness. Now, in the Decalogue, Sabbath rest is explicitly tied to the divine order of creation as described in Genesis 1:1–2:3. The whole community is commanded to imitate the LORD’s consecration of the seventh day, ceasing from ordinary labor. According to the Old Testament’s theology of creation, rest is part of the natural order; without it, humanity and creation become restless, anxious, and prone to strife. Sabbath rest is therefore prescribed for all: Israelite and alien, slave and free, even livestock. The rhythm of rest is woven into the fabric of creation itself.

In Deuteronomy, the theological grounding of the Sabbath shifts from creation to redemption. There the Sabbath becomes a sign of Israel’s liberation—a reminder of their slavery in Egypt and a motivation not to treat others, or creation, with oppression. The Sabbath thus carries both cosmic and historical significance: it reflects the divine pattern of creation and embodies Israel’s

memory of redemption. Through Sabbath rest, Israel participates in God's holiness, remembers God's saving acts, and practices justice and mercy in the life of the community.

Honor Your Parents (Exodus 20:12)

The fifth "word" of the Decalogue—"Honor your father and mother" (Exod 20:12)—functions as a bridge between the vertical and horizontal axes of relationship. On one hand, within the Old Testament's theology of creation, parents are honored as life-givers. In Genesis 1, humanity is created in the divine image, and part of that image is expressed in the command to be fruitful and multiply. Parents, in this theological vision, participate in God's creative work; they are co-creators and co-caretakers with God. Children are therefore expected to revere their parents—the co-creators—in a manner analogous to their reverence for God, the Creator.

On another level, the command reflects the social reality of the ancient world, where kinship bonds were essential for survival. Multi-generational households provided protection, economic stability, and social cohesion. Honoring parents was not merely a private virtue but a communal necessity. It is significant that this is the only command in the Decalogue that looks forward to a promise: long life in the land. Thriving in the promised land would require strong family and clan structures capable of sustaining social order, mutual care, and resilience. The fifth word thus unites theological identity and social responsibility, grounding Israel's future flourishing in the integrity of its most intimate relationships.

Do Not Kill (Exodus 20:13)

The sixth "word" of the Decalogue—"You shall not kill"—appears in most ancient law codes. In Israel's context, the command again reflects the theology of creation: humanity is made in the image of God, and no human being has the natural right to extinguish that image. The story of Cain and Abel provides the foundational precedent. When Cain killed Abel, the very earth cried out for justice (Gen 4). What is at stake in the command is the sanctity of human life, which bears the imprint of the Creator.

The Hebrew verb *ratzach* ("to kill") is given no further explanation in the text. Of its forty-seven uses in the Old Testament, it is notably never used in the context of war and only occasionally in the modern sense of murder (intentional killing) or manslaughter (unintentional killing). Most frequently, *ratzach* refers to acts of blood vengeance. The prohibition in the Decalogue was likely originally aimed at preventing such vengeance killings, which threatened social stability and communal order. This reading aligns well with the Cain and Abel narrative, where the cycle of violence emerges from personal retaliation. The sixth word thus protects the divine image, restrains cycles of vengeance, and preserves the integrity of the community.

Do Not Commit Adultery (Exodus 20:14)

The seventh “word” of the Decalogue—“You shall not commit adultery” (Exod 20:14)—is likewise found in most ancient law codes. While some societies directed their prohibitions primarily toward women, both the Mesopotamian code of Hammurabi and the Israelite tradition applied the law to men and women alike (in principle if not always in practice; cf. Deut 22:22). Adultery was prohibited for two primary reasons.

First, adultery posed a direct threat to the stability of family and clan. Marriage created a bond not only between two individuals but between extended households. The breaking of that bond through adultery could fracture the unity of the larger social structure. Prohibitions against adultery were therefore intended to preserve communal cohesion, protect the social order, and secure Israel’s flourishing in the land.

Second, and more theologically, adultery was understood as a violation of Israel’s covenant with the LORD. The marriage bond served as a sign of God’s covenant union with Israel. To break that bond was to distort the sign of the covenant itself and to undermine Israel’s priestly vocation. Later in Israel’s history, the prophets would seize upon this imagery, using adultery as a metaphor for Israel’s infidelity to the LORD (see Hos 1–3). In this way, the seventh word addresses both the integrity of Israel’s communal life and the integrity of Israel’s relationship with God.

Do Not Steal (Exodus 20:15)

The eighth “word” of the Decalogue—“You shall not steal”—is another command widely attested in ancient law codes. The Hebrew verb *ganav* (“to steal”) is broad in scope, referring to the taking of any possession belonging to another, including land, crops, livestock, and even family members. Theft in the ancient world was not merely a personal offense; it carried significant economic and social consequences. Taking another’s property could destabilize a household’s livelihood for generations, and it could fracture communal trust, creating fear, suspicion, and long-lasting social disruption.

The prohibition against stealing is therefore aimed at preserving the proper functioning of society. It protects the integrity of households, the stability of clan relationships, and the cohesion of the wider community. In the context of Israel’s covenant life, the eighth word reinforces the broader theological theme that holiness is expressed not only in worship but also in just and faithful relationships with one another.

Do Not Bear False Witness (Exodus 20:16)

Gerhard von Rad argues that the ninth “word” of the Decalogue—prohibiting bearing false witness—was almost certainly originally situated within the context of formal judicial inquiry.⁵

⁵ Gerard von Rad, *Old Testament Theology*, volume 1.

Like the previous commands, it is concerned with social order and the protection of Israel's communal life in the land. In an ancient legal system, truth-telling was essential. When false witness was permitted, justice itself was threatened, verdicts were corrupted, and the entire judicial structure fell into disrepute. A society built on covenant fidelity could not endure if its courts were compromised by deceit.

The theological stakes are equally significant. Israel's legal system—its statutes, procedures, and judgments—was established through divine intervention and grounded in the LORD's revelation. To bear false witness, therefore, was not merely to deceive a neighbor; it was to misuse the very structures God had given for the preservation of justice. False testimony distorted the covenant, undermined the holiness of communal life, and violated Israel's priestly calling to reflect divine truthfulness. In this way, the ninth word protects both the integrity of Israel's courts and the integrity of Israel's relationship with the LORD.

Do Not Covet (Exodus 20:17)

The final “word” of the Decalogue, the prohibition against covetousness, is the most difficult to translate because—unlike the other commands—it does not address a visible act or outward behavior. This last word is intangible, aimed at the inclination of the heart. The Hebrew root *ḥāmad* (“desire,” “covet”) has a wide semantic range, but it consistently refers to an inward disposition toward something external. The idea, supported throughout the Old Testament, is that one should not cultivate desire for what belongs to another because the heart's orientation should be directed toward the LORD. As Mark Scarlata observes:

“The final command is significant because it demonstrates that the path to holiness for God's people is not only about refraining from harmful, outward actions. Holiness also requires cultivating and disciplining the heart's desires so that even inner thoughts are held captive to YHWH.”⁶

The tenth word thus moves the Decalogue from external conduct to interior formation. Holiness is not merely behavioral; it is rooted in the disciplined ordering of desire.

Two final points are essential for studying the Decalogue. First, the prohibitions in Exodus 20 (and in the later version in Deuteronomy 5) are not static. Their interpretation and application developed over time as Israel's context changed and as the nation grew in its understanding of itself in relationship to God. As Israel matured, so did its reading of the commandments. For example, although the ninth word originally addressed judicial proceedings, later biblical narratives apply it to slander, deception, and actions incongruent with truth. The story of David

⁶ Mark Scarlata, *Abiding Presence*, 168-169

and Bathsheba in 2 Samuel 11–12 illustrates how false witness can extend beyond the courtroom into the broader realm of moral integrity.

Second, the prohibitions—especially those in the final six words—are balanced in Israel’s unfolding tradition by positive expectations. The Decalogue’s “you shall not” is complemented throughout the Old Testament by “you shall” commands that articulate the active pursuit of justice, mercy, faithfulness, and holiness. In this way, the Decalogue serves not only as a boundary but as a foundation for Israel’s vocation as a priestly and holy people, shaping both outward conduct and inward disposition as they live in covenant with the LORD.

THE BOOK OF THE COVENANT (Exodus 20:22-23:19)

After the Decalogue comes the Book of the Covenant, explicitly named in Exodus 24:7. Historically, many of the laws within it reflect a pre-Mosaic, agrarian society. The Israelite laws bear striking resemblance in content, form, and language to other legal codes of the ancient Near East, especially those from Mesopotamia. Yet the Israelite code remains distinctive in the value it places on human life over property—a reflection, perhaps, of humanity’s unique place within the divine creation. The Book of the Covenant flows directly from the Decalogue: it is instruction for how Israel is to live and grow in holiness and fulfill its vocation as a priestly nation.

The Book of the Covenant is not a comprehensive law code. Instead, it presents a diverse collection of religious, economic, and social regulations addressing situations that might arise within the community. Most of these laws are casuistic—hypothetical case laws framed as “If X happens, then Y follows.” Apodictic or declarative law is rare in the Old Testament and appears in codified form only in the Decalogue. The prevalence of casuistry suggests that the Book of the Covenant is not meant to be exhaustive. Rather, it establishes guiding principles that can be applied broadly. In this way, even a relatively brief law code can govern nearly every aspect of communal life.

The Book of the Covenant begins in Exodus 20:22 with a renewed emphasis on God’s self-disclosure—both as the God who speaks from the heavens and the God who is present with Israel on earth. The very God encountered at Sinai is the one delivering this code. Although the Book of the Covenant contains no explicit internal divisions, its content naturally falls into several thematic groupings, each reflecting how Israel is to embody holiness, justice, and covenant fidelity in daily life.

Altar Laws (Exodus 20:23-26)

Exodus 20:23–26 contains what have come to be known as the altar laws. These regulations echo the first and second words of the Decalogue: exclusive worship of the LORD and the prohibition against idols. The instructions for building altars suggest an early period in Israel's history, reminiscent of the patriarchal narratives in Genesis. The requirement that altars be made of rough, uncut stone points to a time of nomadism or semi-nomadism, when the people lacked both the tools and the settled conditions necessary for stone-carving.

Yet the prohibition against hewn stone may also reflect a theological concern. Carved stones were commonly used by Israel's neighbors to mark sacred sites or to represent deities. By forbidding carved altars, the LORD ensures that Israel's worship remains distinct from surrounding religious practices. The simplicity of the altar underscores the immediacy of God's presence and prevents Israel from adopting the artistic or symbolic conventions associated with idolatry. In this way, the altar laws reinforce the Decalogue's central themes: exclusive devotion, purity of worship, and the rejection of any physical representation that might blur the distinction between Israel and the nations.

Laws Concerning Slaves (Exodus 21:1-11)

Exodus 21:1 introduces the *mishpatim*, the judicial judgments. It is worth repeating that these statutes, like those that follow, flow directly from the Decalogue. Mediated through Moses, the *mishpatim* have a clearly identified divine source and, as Terence Fretheim notes, are inseparable from the relationship God has established with his chosen people.⁷ The *mishpatim* begin with laws concerning slavery. Historically, such laws indicate a settled, agrarian society, suggesting that these regulations reflect a later stage of Israel's development.

The presence of slavery laws raises an unavoidable question: Why would Israel—a people whose national identity is rooted in deliverance from slavery—permit the holding of slaves? There is no satisfying answer, nor is one required. The tension is real and should not be glossed over. Israel's legal tradition contains both the memory of its own oppression and the reality of its participation in the social structures of the ancient world. It is noteworthy, however, that later laws in Leviticus and Deuteronomy concerning the release of slaves in the year of Jubilee point toward a desire, at least in principle, for freedom and restoration. These later developments suggest an evolving moral imagination within Israel's tradition, one that remembers its own redemption and gestures toward a more expansive vision of liberation.

The opening of the *mishpatim* thus reveals both continuity and complexity: continuity with the Decalogue's concern for justice and communal order, and complexity in Israel's attempt to live out holiness within the imperfect social realities of its time.

⁷ TE Fretheim, *Exodus*, IBC, 244-245.

Laws Concerning Death (Exodus 21:12-17)

Exodus 21:12–17 contains laws concerning crimes punishable by death. These statutes echo the gravity of the fifth and sixth words of the Decalogue, for the offenses listed here are violations against the Creator, in whose image humanity is made and in whose creative work parents participate. Each crime strikes at the foundations of life and family, the very structures through which God’s purposes are carried forward.

These offenses also represent profound breaches of communal order. In Israel’s world, the stability of the clan and the integrity of the household were essential for survival, protection, and flourishing in the land. Crimes such as homicide, assaulting parents, or kidnapping threatened not only individuals but the entire social fabric. The severity of the prescribed penalties reflects the seriousness of maintaining communal cohesion and safeguarding the divine image within the community.

in this way, the death-penalty laws of Exodus 21:12–17 continue the theological trajectory of the Decalogue: they protect life, honor the Creator’s work, and preserve the communal structures necessary for Israel’s vocation as a holy and priestly people.

Laws Concerning Retaliation (Exodus 21:18-36)

Exodus 21:18–38 contains the laws of *lex talionis*, regulations concerning retaliation for violence against persons or property. Summed up by the phrase “an eye for an eye,” *lex talionis* reflects a widespread legal principle found throughout the ancient Near East—from Asia Minor and Egypt to Mesopotamia, including the early codes of Ur-Nammu and Hammurabi. In practice, these laws were not applied as rigid literal requirements but were understood as overarching principles of just and proportionate punishment. Judges interpreted them case by case, ensuring that consequences matched the severity of the offense without escalating cycles of vengeance.

The presence of *lex talionis* in Israel’s law underscores the Decalogue’s concern for justice, communal stability, and the protection of both life and property. It establishes a framework in which harm is addressed fairly, preventing disproportionate retaliation and preserving the integrity of the community.

Laws Concerning Restitution (Exodus 22:1-15)

Exodus 22:1–15 echoes the eighth word of the Decalogue, expanding the prohibition against stealing into a series of principles governing restitution for damage, loss, or misuse of another’s property. These laws establish expectations for how the community should respond when property is stolen, destroyed, or harmed—whether through intentional wrongdoing or accidental mishap.

Like much of the Book of the Covenant, these statutes function as overarching guidelines rather than exhaustive regulations. They articulate the kinds of restitution appropriate to various situations, ensuring that losses are addressed fairly and that communal trust is preserved. In this way, Exodus 22:1–15 extends the Decalogue’s concern for social stability, protecting both property and relationships through a framework of justice, responsibility, and restoration.

Justice for the Vulnerable (Exodus 22:16-23:9)

Exodus 22:16–23:9 contains, with a few exceptions, laws concerning the treatment of the vulnerable. Of particular significance, Exodus 22:21–24 addresses those who have no legal standing or family protection: aliens, orphans, and widows. These statutes are unique within the Book of the Covenant because violations provoke explicit divine intervention—likely because these individuals had no kinship network to defend them or seek legal redress. The shift in Exodus 22:23 to the first-person singular (“I will hear...”) is striking. The reader encounters a God who personally guarantees justice for the oppressed, echoing the LORD’s earlier response to Israel’s cries in Egypt.

This section makes clear that Israel’s communal life is to be marked by justice, mercy, and compassion for the resident alien and all who lack social protection. The laws concerning the vulnerable reveal the heart of Israel’s covenant identity: a people who mirror the character of the God who hears, remembers, sees, and acts on behalf of the oppressed.

Laws Concerning the Sabbath and Worship (Exodus 23:10-19)

Exodus 23:10–19 contains the final commands of the Book of the Covenant, addressing Sabbath rest and the annual festivals. Both topics are substantial, though the Exodus narrative offers little elaboration at this point; their fuller development appears later in Leviticus and Deuteronomy. The seventh year of rest mirrors the seventh day of rest, each rooted in Israel’s understanding of creation and the Creator’s rhythm. The verb *napash*, translated “refresh” in Exodus 23:12, is elsewhere rendered “breathe.” The implication is striking: the seventh day and the seventh year were consecrated so that all creation might breathe again—recovering vitality, renewing strength, and being revived.

These commands reinforce the theological pattern woven throughout the covenant code. Rest is not merely cessation from labor but participation in the divine rhythm of creation. The festivals likewise orient Israel’s life toward remembrance, gratitude, and worship. Together, Sabbath and festival form the liturgical heartbeat of Israel’s communal identity, ensuring that the people’s life in the land is marked by renewal, celebration, and the continual acknowledgment of God’s sustaining presence.

THE PROMISED CONQUEST (Exodus 23:20-33)

The Book of the Covenant concludes with a final exhortation that looks ahead to Israel's future in the land of Canaan. The figure of the messenger or angel who bears the LORD's authority is intriguing, though the narrative offers no explanation for why it is not the LORD himself who leads Israel through the wilderness. The boundaries of the land described here reflect the ideal limits promised to Abraham in Genesis 15—borders Israel never fully attained. Still, the LORD pledges to drive out the inhabitants before Israel as the people purify the land of any trace of Canaanite worship. As Israel prepares to enter into the most consequential covenant in its history, it must be ready to accept the full weight of its demands.

As with the tension surrounding slavery, there is no need to gloss over the narrative of land seizure and what modern readers might describe as colonial oppression. The text presents these realities plainly. They must be acknowledged, placed within their ancient context, and discussed without excuse or erasure.

THE SEALING OF THE COVENANT (Exodus 24:1-18)

Exodus 24:1–18 presents the scene of covenant ratification. In the ancient world, covenants, treaties, and other solemn agreements were sealed either through a sacrificial blood rite or a covenant meal. Here, the narrative includes both, likely reflecting the harmonization of two traditions. Together with the reading of the Decalogue and the Book of the Covenant, these ceremonies formalize Israel's full participation in the covenant and the life to which the LORD has called them.

The sacrificial blood rite appears in Exodus 24:3–8. According to Leviticus 17:11, “the life of the flesh is in the blood.” In this scene, blood functions according to its ancient symbolism as a sign of consecration. It is noteworthy that blood had previously served as a sign of consecration when the Israelites marked their doorposts during the Passover, being spared from death. Later, in Levitical practice, sacrificial blood would signify atonement—consecration through repentance and renewal. In Exodus 24, Moses sprinkles both the altar *and* the people with the sacrificial blood - the people themselves becoming consecrated as an acceptable offering to the LORD.

The covenant meal is described in mystical rather than literal terms. Moses, Aaron, Nadab, Abihu, and the seventy elders ascend the mountain, and the text declares that they “saw the God of Israel,” even though later tradition insists that “no one shall see [the LORD] and live” (Exod 33:20). Such is the overwhelming glory of the LORD that the only description given is of what lies beneath God's feet: “a pavement of sapphires.” The Hebrew *hāzāh* (“to see,” “to behold”) denotes a full encounter with the divine presence. The transformation is complete:

former slaves now eat and drink at the LORD's table, sealing their identity as God's treasured possession.⁸ The covenant meal fittingly concludes the Sinai event and anticipates Israel's promised rest in the land, though its fulfillment will take time.

Exodus 24, with its blood consecration and covenant meal, marks a literary transition in the manifestation of the divine presence. The Israelites, the elders, Moses, Joshua, and the others are consecrated so that they may come before the LORD without being consumed by divine holiness. Since the first revelation to Moses at the burning bush, God's presence has been on display—through mighty acts in Egypt and through the glory revealed at Sinai. The LORD had drawn near to the people, but the people had not drawn near to the LORD until now. In Exodus 24, the elders represent Israel as they approach the divine presence.

At the chapter's end, Moses and Joshua ascend further into the mountain, deeper into the cloud of glory:

“The glory of the LORD settled on Mount Sinai, and the cloud covered it for six days; on the seventh day he called to Moses out of the cloud.” (Exod 24:16)

Moses had already stood in the LORD's presence and received the *dēbārîm*, but now he must be prepared. The six days echo the creation narrative, and on the seventh day—the consecrated time—Moses enters the consecrated space. There, within that sanctified moment, Moses receives the instructions for building the tabernacle, the holy dwelling through which the LORD will remain present with the people of the covenant.

⁸ Propp, *Exodus 19-40*, AB:309. See also Scarlata, *The Abiding Presence*, 178.