

COVENANT COMMUNITY
Meta-stories in the Pentateuch

LESSON FIVE: THE LAW COVENANT
THE SAGA OF MOSES AND THE HEBREWS

Opening prayer

God of Moses and the mountain, shake us out of our complacency. Frighten us with new responsibilities. Reveal to us the new world you would create in partnership with us – a world of reverence and justice. Amen.

Navigating this lesson

The first half of *Exodus* is familiar to most of us. The Hebrews escape from Egypt; they wander for 40 years in the wilderness; Moses climbs the mountain and brings down Ten Commandments. The second half of *Exodus* is less familiar. It is mostly construction blueprints and patterns for outfitting the priests. The “tabernacle” and the Ark of the Covenant are central to this part of the story. *Boring!* Unless we follow the arc of the meta-story all the way to Jesus’ dying moment.

The terms “Hebrews” and “Israelites” are used somewhat interchangeably throughout the Hebrew Scriptures. The word “Hebrew” comes from *habiru* which appears in Egyptian and Mesopotamian histories in reference to Semitic tribes leading marginal and precarious lives on the fringes of the great empires. They are referred to as nomadic, outlaws, servants, migrant laborers, slaves, etc. The word “Israelite” refers to a specific group of *habiru* who traced their ancestry back to Jacob and Jacob’s twelve sons. Jacob was Abraham’s grandson and Joseph’s father. After wrestling with an angel, Jacob was renamed “Israel.” (*Genesis 32:28*)

Read the story of Moses and the Israelites in *Exodus 1:1 – 20:26*.

(The same story is condensed in the first five chapters of Deuteronomy.)

Read *Acts 6:1-60* – Stephen’s version of the meta-story so far.

Focus texts: Exodus 20:1-26; Exodus 25:10-22; Joshua 6:1-11;
II Samuel 6:1-11; John 1:14-18; Matthew 27:45-54

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Exodus is the second document in the Pentateuch. The cast of characters is enormous: Moses, Miriam, Aaron, Pharaoh, Pharaoh's daughter (and her servants), Israelites (hundreds), Egyptians (thousands), soldiers, midwives, Jethro, Amalek, Zipporah, hail, frogs, locusts, blood, boils, darkness, thunder, bread, lambs. But the star of the story is *YHWH*.

YHWH beckons to Moses from a burning bush. *YHWH* sends plagues that bring Pharaoh to his knees. *YHWH* leads the Israelites out of captivity with a pillar of fire. *YHWH* parts the Red Sea. *YHWH* terrifies Moses on Mount Sinai. *YHWH* loads Moses up with two stone tablets that will change the course of human history. We call them the Ten Commandments. The Israelites knew them as the "Tablets of the Covenant."



When God finished speaking with Moses on Mount Sinai, he gave him the two tablets of the covenant, tablets of stone, written with the finger of God.

{ *Exodus 31:18* }

Tribal peoples trembled before the "mountain gods" – thunder and lightning came from the mountains. Mountain gods were feared; they were mysterious, distant, unapproachable, and they often brought misfortune. So the tribal peoples offered sacrifices ("burnt offerings") to pacify and propitiate the mountain gods.

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; you shall have no other gods before me. { *Exodus 20:1-3* }

This is the first of the Ten Commandment. It does not deny the existence of the other gods. It commands the Israelites to put *YHWH* "above" the other gods they see worshiped around them.

Tribal peoples also worshipped fertility gods (or goddesses). These were friendlier; they were in charge of daily good fortune (flocks, children, health). Fertility gods were carved figurines (idols) made of wood or metal that the people

could carry around with them. Fertility gods were cherished, nurtured, and worshipped for individual or family blessings. The second Commandment takes direct aim at the fertility gods and goddesses:

You shall not make for yourself an idol, whether in the form of anything that is in heaven above, or that is on the earth beneath,... for I the Lord your God am a jealous God.... { *Exodus 20:4-6* }

YHWH is not to be found in wood or stone or anything humans make. *YHWH* is the breath of life, the Ground of Being. *YHWH* transcends all Creation. This leads ultimately to monotheism – the belief in one God. This also leads to scientific curiosity, since if God is not “in” objects, they can be examined, taken apart, made use of.

You shall not make wrongful use of the name of the Lord, your God....
{ *Exodus 20:7* }

To speak *YHWH*'s name was to summon the power that brought the Universe into being. To bless or curse in *YHWH*'s name evoked the power of all Creation. As a priestly people the Israelites must use this power wisely and very very cautiously.

Remember the Sabbath day, and keep it holy. Six days you shall labor and do all your work. But the seventh day is a Sabbath to the Lord your god; you shall not do any work – you, your son or your daughter, your male or female slave, your livestock, or the alien resident in your towns. For in six days the Lord made heaven and earth,... but rested the seventh day; therefore the Lord blessed the Sabbath day and consecrated it.
{ *Exodus 20:8-11* }

“Remember the Sabbath and keep it holy” – this is the longest of the Ten Commandments. Rabbi Abraham Heschel calls the Sabbath “a palace in time,” constructed of hours and meditations. Sabbath rest applies to resident aliens and to animals. In other words, the Sabbath was holy to all peoples and to all Creation. The Sabbath was the centerpiece of the Israelites’ role as a priestly people – mediating the holiness of *YHWH* to the entire world.

Honor your father and your mother, so that
your days may be long in the land that the
Lord your God is giving you.

{ *Exodus 20:12* }

“Parents” included Abraham and Sarah and Isaac and Rebekah and Jacob and Joseph and Moses. If the Israelites failed to honor their previous generations, they would forget the Covenant and *YHWH*’s providence and their vocation as a priestly people. Future generations would suffer if there were none to lead all Creation into a proper reverence for its Creator. The Israelites were to “keep the Sabbath” so surrounding nations could witness holiness in the Israelites’ lives and be drawn toward their God - *YHWH*.

These first five Commandments govern a relationship with God. The final five Commandments govern relationships with other people.

You shall not murder.

You shall not commit adultery.

You shall not steal.

You shall not bear false witness against your
neighbor.

You shall not covet your neighbor’s
house; you shall not covet your neighbor’s
wife, or male or female slave, or ox, or
donkey, or anything that belongs to your
neighbor.

{ *Exodus 20:13-17* }

The first half of *Exodus* is probably the most exciting and suspenseful portion of the Bible. The remainder of *Exodus*, all of *Leviticus* and much of *Numbers* is perhaps the most boring section in all of Scripture, containing

hundreds of rituals, festivals, practices, laws, prohibitions, building blueprints and dress patterns. The Ten Commandments stress ethics and good behavior. Then *Exodus* launches into laws about the altar, laws concerning slaves, laws concerning property, laws of restitution, social laws, religious laws, laws concerning the Sabbath and finally directions for building a Tabernacle.

The Lord said to Moses: Tell the Israelites to take for me an offering; from all whose hearts prompt them to give you shall receive the offering for me. This is the offering that you shall receive from them: gold, silver, and bronze, blue, purple, and crimson yarns and fine linen, goats' hair, tanned rams' skins, fine leather, acacia wood, oil for the lamps, spices for the anointing oil and for the fragrant incense, onyx stones and gems to be set in the ephod and for the breastpiece. And have them make me a sanctuary, so that I may dwell among them. In accordance with all that I show you concerning the pattern of the tabernacle and of all its furniture, so you shall make it.

{ *Exodus 25:1-9* }

If the Israelites fled Egypt carrying nothing, and now were lost in the desert wilderness, where did all this wealth come from (gold, silver, fine linen, leather, oil, spices, gems)? Why build a sanctuary here, when they were on their way to the promised land? How does this fancy tabernacle fit with the Ten Commandments?

Think back to Lesson One. That was our introduction to *YHWH*, a divinity so holy that Moses had to hide behind a rock or be blinded by *YHWH*'s "glory." Clouds swirled around the mountain whenever Moses climbed up to converse with *YHWH*. First *YHWH* sent down the Commandments. But now *YHWH* has decided to come down "in Person" to live (dwell) with the tribes.

Picture it! The people were terrified of *YHWH*. The God of all Creation was going to set up housekeeping right in their midst. Lord, have mercy! What kind of a tent, what kind of a "dwelling place," would be fit for *YHWH*? The issue was compounded by the reality that they were stuck at a remote oasis in the trackless desert.

A great “church argument” ensued. It was a doozy. Did *YHWH* want to dwell in a simple portable tent so the Israelites could stay on the move, or did *YHWH* prefer incense, anointing oil, fine leather and acacia wood befitting His status? They built both. They built a tabernacle with all the bells and whistles and they built an Ark of the Covenant, which was portable.

The tabernacle had a crimson curtain to shield human eyes from the blinding glory of *YHWH*'s presence. The Ark of the Covenant had poles projecting from its sides so men could carry it on their shoulders. The tabernacle was the dwelling place of the Most High God. The Ark of the Covenant contained the two tablets of the Covenant.

The tabernacle reflects worship practices that evolved *after* the Israelites settled in Canaan. These references in *Exodus* undoubtedly reflect the interests of Temple priests who supervised the editing of *Exodus*. It was the Ark of the Covenant that accompanied the Israelites through their wanderings.

This is boring and seems irrelevant in the 21st century. But don't be too hasty! Most of us do need a sacred place, a sanctuary, a spot where we sense the thin membrane between all that is holy and all that appears ordinary. Rituals help us – until they become ends in themselves.

Annie Dillard reminds us that the stars do not need darkness. They burn both day and night. But if we want to see the stars, we require darkness. God does not require prayers and praise. But if we want a relationship with God, it requires some form of worship: tabernacles, practices, prayers, sanctuaries, meditation, rituals. We need aids to sustain a vital relationship with God. Alas, the “forms” of worship often become more sacred than the object of our worship: the living God.

Throughout this study we have been tracing the mega-story of *covenant*. The Ark of the Covenant reappears again and again. The Israelites carried the Ark of the Covenant with them when they finally left the oasis at the foot of Mount Sinai. Whenever they lost their way they set up a tabernacle, lit a sacred fire, and sacrificed an animal. *YHWH* then appeared as an enveloping cloud, a blinding Presence. When they “fit the battle of Jericho” they circled the city seven times, blowing trumpets and carrying the Ark of the Covenant.

“Take up the ark of the covenant, and seven priests carry seven trumpets of rams' horns in

front of the ark of the Lord.” ... As Joshua had commanded the people, the seven priests carrying the seven trumpets of rams’ horns before the Lord went forward, blowing the trumpets, with the ark of the covenant of the Lord following them. { *Joshua 6:6,8* }

Soon after the tribes finally reached Canaan and began to settle in, the Ark of the Covenant was stolen by Philistines. Without *YHWH*’s protection and guidance the Israelites languished. David rescued the Ark from the Philistines and returned it to Jerusalem. David was acclaimed King. The city of Jerusalem – site of Ark of the Covenant - became the unifying center of Jewish life.

While returning the Ark of the Covenant amid great jubilation (David danced till his pants fell off!), the Ark tottered on its cart.

The anger of the Lord was kindled against Uzzah; and God struck there because he reached out his hand to the ark; and he died there beside the ark of God. David was angry because the Lord had burst forth with an outburst upon Uzzah { *II Samuel 6:6-8* }

Uzzah reached out to steady the Ark of the Covenant and was struck dead. David’s anger is understandable. Poor Uzzah was only trying to help. But the story is not about justice for Uzzah – it’s about the holiness and power of *YHWH*.

King David promised to build a Temple in Jerusalem to house the Ark of the Covenant. This will be a fitting “dwelling place” for *YHWH*. It fell to his son, King Solomon, to complete the monumental construction.

The Temple in Jesus’ time was a reconstruction, the second Temple. Nearly six centuries before Christ, Jerusalem fell to invading Babylonians. Israel’s leaders were taken into exile and the first Jerusalem Temple was destroyed. This was the occasion for *Jeremiah* to tell the Jews that they must keep the *Torah* written on their hearts.

When the Temple was rebuilt it was laid out in concentric squares. Perimeter walls surrounded a courtyard where people exchanged their Roman money for special Temple coins that lacked the graven image of Caesar. With the

Temple coins they bought animals to sacrifice – a pigeon or a dove if they were poor, a lamb or a bull if they were rich and had many sins. These were taken to the women’s courtyard; women could go no farther. Men entered the men’s square where a priest took their sacrifice (still alive) from them. Priests then took the birds and animals to a higher level. Here were great tables on which the creatures were slaughtered. Trenches in the stone floor of the Temple carried gallons of blood outside the Temple walls.

At the very center of the Temple, at its highest point, shrouded inside a veil, was the Holy of Holies. Only the High Priest entered the Holy of Holies, and he entered only once a year, carrying a sacrifice for the sins of the whole people. Here in the Holy of Holies was the sacred, vital, dangerous, living presence of *YHWH*, the eternal Presence the Israelites carried and protected and preserved in the Ark of the Covenant from the time of Moses.

Pay close attention now to this detail as *Matthew* describes the crucifixion:

From noon on, darkness came over the whole land until three in the afternoon. And about three o’clock Jesus cried with a loud voice, “Eli, Eli, lema sabachthani?” that is, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” ... Then Jesus cried again with a loud voice and breathed his last. At that moment the curtain of the temple was torn in two, from top to bottom. The earth shook, and the rocks were split. The tombs also were opened.... { *Matthew 27:45-52* }

At the moment of Jesus’ death “the curtain of the Temple was torn in two.” The Holy of Holies was left exposed. The Holy One was no longer shrouded and hidden. ***God escapes!*** The whole structure of Temple religion collapses.

Every mainline Protestant denomination is bleeding members. Congregations are “graying.” Small town churches cannot afford both a sanctuary and a pastor.

But God did not die when the veil of the Temple was torn in two. God escaped and is still very much alive. God still dwells among us!

If all the churches were turned into used-car lots, God would still be very much alive. What will “Church” look like if it does not look like anything we are familiar with? Where and how will God “tabernacle” with God’s people?

The answer to that probably lies in an evolving theology which places less emphasis on Jesus’ death and more emphasis on Jesus’ birth.

Temple worship was built around the idea that *YHWH* required blood sacrifices. Saint Paul used the familiar Temple vocabulary as he carried the Gospel message out of Jerusalem and into the wider Roman Empire. He described Jesus’ death on the Cross as the only sacrifice God requires. In both Catholic and Protestant traditions this became a dominant theme. It is called “atonement theology” – that God required Jesus’ death as a sacrifice to pay for our sins.

For two millennia theology has been the exclusive domain of men. (The exception is the long tradition of Catholic female mystics and saints.) As more and more women have joined the ranks of teaching theologians, they have raised a shattering question. If God required His Son’s death, doesn’t that make God something of a child abuser?

As the “other half” of humanity (women and girls) speaks from their unique perspective and experience, the Church is being called to look afresh at cherished ideas. Some are asking, if we must speak of blood at all, why not the blood of the Incarnation rather than the blood of the Crucifixion? Why not the blood of the Manger instead of the blood of the Cross?

And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father’s only son, full of grace and truth... From his fullness we have all received, grace upon grace. The law indeed was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ. No one has ever seen God. It is God the only Son, who is close to the Father’s heart, who has made him known.

{ John 1:14-18 }

Jesus Christ reveals a God who is compassionate, merciful, forgiving, kind and utterly without violence, a God who is not at all blood-thirsty.

Perhaps in our own time, through the work of women theologians, God has once more escaped the religious traditions in which we thought to confine the “Holy.” Once more the veil of our temples is being torn so we can experience God anew.

Jesus Christ becomes the central point of a Covenant Community. The Risen Christ dwells with us. What else do we need?

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SOME QUESTIONS FOR FURTHER DISCUSSION AND FOR REFLECTION, PONDERING, CONVERSATION

Where is your tabernacle – the place where God dwells?

What rituals or spiritual practices or sacred places help you focus your attention on God? What brings you into the presence of the Holy?

What parts of our worship service are most important to you? If “church” takes on new forms, what is most important to salvage from our present practices?

How does the Law Covenant (through Moses) differ from the Land Covenant (through Abraham)?

Consider the fifth Commandment. If Abraham and Sarah and Isaac and Rebekah and Jacob and Joseph and Moses and the Israelites are our parents, how do we honor them?

How do you respond to the idea that we build our beliefs around the Blood of the Incarnation instead of the Blood of Atonement?

