

Sinai and Covenant

Deliverance from Egypt forms the basis of Sinaitic Covenant and sanctification of Israel as God's chosen people. It also establishes a model of divine communication and lays down the foundation of all the laws (ritual, social, political, religious) that follow in Exodus, Leviticus, and Numbers, which are presented as having been delivered to the people by God through Moses.

1. Theophany at Mt. Sinai in Ex 19-20 (J and E; no theophany to entire people in P)

- Reasons given for the Theophany to all Israel on Mt. Sinai: [1] "so that the people may hear when I speak with you [i.e., Moses], and may also believe you for ever" (19:9; E) and [2] so that they will worship YHWH alone (20:22-23; J: "And YHWH said to Moses, "Thus you shall say to the people of Israel: 'You have seen for yourselves that I have talked with you from heaven; you shall not make gods of silver to be with me, nor shall you make for yourselves gods of gold.'")
- Nature of holiness necessitates sanctification before beholding God (both J and E): consecration, washing, and bounds set around the mountain. Esp. in material associated with J, holiness is depicted as dangerous for humans (19:21; J: "And YHWH said to Moses, "Go down and warn the people, lest they break through to YHWH to gaze and many of them perish."); God as wholly Other.
- J and E's depictions of YHWH evoke the storm-gods (dark clouds, thunder, lightening) and mountain-gods (holy mountain as *axis mundi*) of the ancient Near East: "Mount Sinai was wrapped in smoke, because YHWH descended upon it in fire; and the smoke of it went up like the smoke of a kiln, and the whole mountain quaked greatly."
- Israel trembles in response to the appearance of God ("You speak to us, and we will hear; but let not God speak to us, lest we die!"). Fear reflects response to otherness and power of God but also helps obedience ("And Moses said to the people, "Do not fear; for God has come to test you, and that the fear of him may be before your eyes, that you may not sin.")
- Can God be seen? Different views in Exodus: the text states that no one can see God and live (33:20), but many do see God. For instance, in Tent of Meeting, YHWH appears to Moses "face to face, as one speaks to a friend" (33:11); in 33:18-23 (E), Moses sees only his back; in 34:5-8 (J), YHWH descends in a cloud and stands with Moses.

2. Sinai and Covenant in Sources (J, E, P) according to the Documentary Hypothesis

P: No theophany to entire people: Moses alone goes up the mountain and delivers Law; positive portrayal of Aaron throughout (e.g., no Golden Calf story).

E: In keeping w/ its lack of material on Creation and primeval history and its sparse coverage of the Patriarchal period, E's main focus is the Sinaitic covenant; ample material on the covenant, exodus from Egypt, and the giving of the Law on the mountain—which E calls the "mountain of God" or "Horev." E stresses the conditional character of the covenant, emphasizes the need for obedience, and depicts Israel as "kingdom of priests" whose chosenness comes with more responsibilities to the broader world. Moses is here the prototype of the prophet, mediating the covenant; people cannot view God directly, and the theophany serves to demonstrate to them that Moses does indeed have direct access to God. In E, God reveals himself in thunder and lightning and a thick cloud, like a storm god (e.g., the Canaanite god Baal), evoking fear and trembling. Moses' communication with God is made easier through the construction of a Tent of Meeting.

J: This source stresses continuity between covenant and promises to Abraham and covenant and promises to Israel via Moses. J calls the mountain "Sinai" and implies that God appears directly to all the people, such that they all had to consecrate themselves before meeting Him. In comparison to E, J depicts the theophany more like a volcanic eruption than a thunderstorm: smoke ascended in a column, and there was an earthquake. Moses' communication with God takes place all on the mountain. Moses is in communication with God but, according to the Yahwist, it must take place on the mountain.

3. Decalogue (“Ten Commandments”) in Exodus 20 (E; compare Deut 5)

20:1-2: Prologue, God’s self-identification and appeal to the exodus (“I am YHWH your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of enslavement”)

Commandments concerning relationship between God and humankind

20:3: Exclusivity of worship (“You may not have any other gods/God [lit. Elohim] before me.”; note lack of denial of existence of other gods.)

20:4-6: Prohibition of idolatry = worship of any physical form (“You may not make for yourself a sculpted image, or any representation of anything that is in heaven above, or on the earth below, or in the water under the earth. You may not bow down to them or serve them; for I YHWH your God am a possessive god, visiting the guilt of the fathers upon the children, upon the third and the fourth generation of those who disown me, but showing loyalty to the thousandth generation of those who love me and keep my commandments.”)

20:7: Proper treatment of God’s Name (“You may not take the name of YHWH your God in vain; for YHWH will not hold him guiltless who takes his name in vain”; originally may have been aimed at false oaths, but here part of stress on God’s name [YHWH] as powerful in its self)

20:8-11: Sabbath observance (“Remember to keep the Sabbath day holy. Six days you may work, and do all your jobs; but the seventh day is a Sabbath to YHWH your God; in it you shall not do any work, you, or your son, or your daughter, your male servant, or your female servant, or your cattle, or the resident alien who lives with you; for in six days YHWH made heaven and earth, the sea, and everything in them, and ceased from work on the seventh day; by doing this YHWH blessed the Sabbath day and made it a holy day.” [underline portion = probably P addition, cf. Gen 1-2])

Commandments concerning relationship between humankind and humankind

20:12: “Honor your father and your mother, so that your days in the land which YHWH your God gives you may be numerous.”)

20:13: “You must not murder.”

20:14: “You must not commit adultery.”

20:15: “You must not steal.”

20:16: “You must not bear false witness against your neighbor.”

20:17: “You must not covet your neighbor’s estate: that is, you must not covet your neighbor’s wife, or his male servant, or his female servant, or his ox, or his ass, or anything that belongs to your neighbor.”

4. Book of the Covenant (20:18-23:33; E)

Self-contained unit; an early covenant code preserved by E: Introduction, 20:18-21; Law of the altar, 20:22-26; Laws dealing with persons, 21:1-32; Laws dealing with property, 21:33-22:17; Other social and cultic laws, 22:18-23:9; Cultic calendar, 23:10-19; Conclusion, 23:20-33

5. Covenant Confirmation (24, E)

Two traditions about ceremonial initiation of covenant in E:

24:1-2, 9-11 (earlier source preserved by E): Moses, Aaron, Nadab and Abihu, and the seventy elders of Israel engage in a covenant confirmation ceremony: “they saw the God of Israel; and there was under his feet what looked like a sapphire stone street, like the heavens itself for clarity, and he did not lay his hand on the leaders of the people of Israel; they saw Elohim, and ate and drank.”

24:3-8 (E): All the people confirm that “All the words which YHWH has spoken we will do” and Moses writes them down, then builds “an altar at the foot of the mountain, along with twelve pillars, matching the twelve tribes of Israel” and make sacrifices. Then he reads to the people from the “book of the covenant” and they confirm again that “All that YHWH has spoken we will do, and we will be obedient.” Blood is thrown on them: “And Moses took the blood and threw it upon the people, and said, ‘Here is the blood of the covenant which YHWH has made with you, in agreement with all these words.’”

After ceremonies, God called Moses up to the mountain to receive “the stone tablets containing the law and the commandment, which I have written for their instruction.”