

“THE BOOK OF THE COVENANT”

(Exodus, Chapters 21 thru 24)

Lesson 14 ended with the introduction to what the writer (Moses) called *The Book of the Covenant* (Ex. 24:7), generally understood to refer to the laws contained in chapters 20 - 23. He was given these in addition to the 10 Commandments on Mt. Sinai and then told to record them into a stand-alone volume. This book appears to have become regarded as especially sacred. I call your attention to this reference in Nehemiah 8: ***“Now all the people gathered together as one man in the open square that was in front of the Water Gate; and they told Ezra the scribe to bring the Book of the Law of Moses, which the Lord had commanded Israel. ...Then he read from it in the open square ...from morning until midday, before the men and women and those who could understand; and the ears of all the people were attentive to the Book of the Law.”*** This Book of the Covenant would have been what Ezra was reading, and this is the last reference to it in Scripture. As far as we know, no copies of it have survived.

A discussion of these ancient documents prompts many to wonder just how they would have been preserved. The book of Job, thought by some to be the earliest written part of the bible, mentions three methods of conserving the written word in Old Testament times: ***“Oh, that my words were recorded, that they were written on a scroll, that they were inscribed with an iron tool on lead, or engraved in rock forever!”*** (Job 19:23-24 NIV)

The most ancient of all writing surfaces was probably clay or stone tablets, and more than a few people believe Moses did all his writing on these. But the truth is, the Ten Commandments were probably the only part of the law written on stone tablets because they were to be safe-guarded through the ages and actually displayed. Of course, we know he broke the first two tablets when he came down the mountain and saw the people worshipping the golden calf, but later he hued out two more. Once the commandments were recorded on these by Jehovah, they were then placed in the Ark of the Covenant.

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Some historians believe there are references to the prophets Isaiah and Habakkuk writing on tablets of wood. Habakkuk says, *“Then the LORD answered me and said: “Write the vision and make it plain on tablets, that he may run who reads it.”* (Habakkuk 2:2 NKJV) And Isaiah was told, *“Now go, write it before them on a tablet, and note it on a scroll, that it may be for time to come, Forever and ever:”* (Isaiah 30:8 NKJV) In both of these passages the Hebrew word translated “tablet” is “**lûach**” which has a primitive root meaning of *“a tablet (as polished), of stone, wood or metal.”* (Strong’s Definition) And, because of what was told to Isaiah, *“...and note it on a scroll so that it may be for time to come...”* the historians believe this implies an original medium of short lifespan, therefore wood or possibly clay.

Obviously, with the weight and general unwieldiness of tablets, the entirety of the Holy Scriptures could not have been recorded and preserved in this way. Etching in stone was reserved for those shorter missives, things meant to be displayed openly – such as the Ten Commandments – and therefore able to withstand the natural wear and tear resulting from being exposed to the elements. So how was the remainder of the Old Testament scriptures preserved? The answer brings us to the most common method of ancient writing known to humans: scrolls of papyrus.

Papyrus, made from the papyrus plant which grew in the swampy areas of the Nile River, was used in Egypt three thousand years before the time of Christ. It is even mentioned by Job when he asks, *“Can papyrus grow where there's no marsh? Can reeds flourish without water?”* (Job 8:11 ISV) Actually, the English word “**Bible**” is derived from the Greek word “**byblos**” which means papyrus. There could also have been segments written on leather from animal skins, but papyrus was by far the medium most often used. It is far more likely then, that the **Book of the Covenant** was preserved in this way. And, having grown up in Egypt, Moses would certainly have been familiar with this medium.

Now, back to our study –

What follows after the 10 Commandments in chapter 20 through the first part of chapter 23 could best be described as “case laws” – detailed principles, or examples, of how Jehovah expected the people to apply His law to the various specific incidents (cases) that would

commonly occur in daily life. Keep in mind that the 10 Commandments served as the base upon which those examples were built.

Before we look into these, unintentionally yet perhaps inevitably reading them through a modern lens, we need to keep a couple of things in mind. First, these laws were given to the nation of Israel for a finite period of time in which they would be establishing their new nation and then living with the decisions they made. And most importantly, they were written by Jehovah in His infinite wisdom. Are we in any position to question His judgment? He knew what the people needed to be told.

Today, we live under a different law – delivered by Jesus – destined for a different people living in a different time period. Even though it is based on the same fundamentals as the old Law of Moses, it is not that law. Therefore, to attempt to view the former law, specifically designed for a specific people and a specific time period, through our 21st century eyes will lead us to make erroneous conclusions and incorrect judgments. Certainly, looking back from our perspective under this new and better covenant – Christ’s Law – some of those old laws will appear overly simplistic to us, maybe even amusing, while others will seem unnecessarily complicated or harsh. But we must remember they were given by an all-knowing God. It would be arrogant for us to “judge” these laws with our limited understanding. Not only did Jehovah know what was needed for His people at that time, regardless of how it may look to us today, we must realize that these laws represent truth and were recorded in scripture for our benefit and our learning.

So, with all of that being said, let’s look back nearly 4000 years at the four general categories of the Law of Moses as they are detailed for us in chapters 21 - 23:

1. Slavery or Servants (Exodus 21:1-11)
2. Restitution (Exodus 21:18-22:15)
3. Opportunities for the Poor (Exodus 22:21-27 & 23:10-11)
4. Lending and Collateral (Exodus 22:25-27)

1. Dealing with Slavery or Servants – (Exodus 21:1-11)

Let me begin by saying that I know that slavery is a difficult topic to discuss. Around 1995, I was teaching a Wednesday night adult bible class studying the book of 1 Corinthians. At that time we had a few members who were people of color. One of the men was deeply involved – active and very outspoken – in Dr. King's movement. One Wednesday evening we arrived at chapter 7, verses 17 through 24 in our study. That is where Paul was telling those Christians that it was acceptable to ***“remain in the same calling in which you were called,”*** because being a Christian had nothing to do with your “lot in life.” Of course, in those verses Paul speaks of a “bondservant” which some bible versions render as “slave.” The man mentioned above had a lot to say in regard to Paul’s statement in verse 20, ***“Let every man abide in the same calling wherein he was called.”*** (KJV)

His mind was so locked into the happenings regarding slaves in the eighteenth through twentieth centuries that he could not focus on what Paul was actually saying in the first century. We met for a lengthy discussion after that class, but he was so focused on the hurt and injustice of current times that he could not see what was actually being taught in scripture. As a result he refused further study and even quit attending that congregation. My point in telling this story is to remind us how important it is to keep historical context in mind before we let our emotions get involved. The truth is, in Old Testament times, slavery was a fact of life all over the world. Actually, once they settled in Canaan, some Israelites found they could not support themselves and volunteered to be bondservants, and their “slavery” turned out to actually be a better life than they might have had otherwise. The Law of Moses was not intended to abolish slavery, but to establish laws whereby the Israelites were taught to treat their slaves far better than other slave owners in the world at that time.

So, how were slaves to be treated? First – any slave or servant **MUST** be regarded as a full-fledged member of the family. We see that this began back in Abraham’s day, because in Genesis 17:13 it is said: ***“The servant born in your house or the one purchased with money is to be circumcised. My covenant is to remain in your flesh as an eternal covenant.”*** (ISV – emphasis is mine.)

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Furthermore, they were to receive the same rest periods and holidays as non-slaves (Exodus 23:12; Deut. 5:14-15, 12:12), and were to be treated humanely. (Ex. 21:7, 26-27) The most important thing to know regarding slavery among the Israelites was that it was NOT intended to be a permanent condition! It was to be a temporary solution to help people in poverty. ***“If you buy a Hebrew servant, he shall serve six years; and in the seventh he shall go out free and pay nothing. If he comes in by himself, he shall go out by himself; if he comes in married, then his wife shall go out with him.”*** (Ex. 21:2-3 NKJV)

However, if this servant chooses not to go free at the end of those six years – ***“then his master shall bring him to the judges*** (the 70 elders – much later the Sanhedrin) ***He shall also bring him to the door, or to the doorpost, and his master shall pierce his ear with an awl; and he shall serve him forever.”*** (Ex. 21:5 & 6 NKJV) Why would any slave choose not to go free? Because he was actually better provided for and cared for in this condition than he would have been on his own. Actually, cruelty on the part of the owner resulted in immediate freedom for the slave. (Ex. 21:26-27) Under these laws, male Hebrew slavery was more like a “medium-term contract” instead of a permanent exploitation as it is often characterized in modern times.

Perhaps the most common purpose for buying a female slave was so that she could become the wife of either the buyer or the buyer’s son. (Ex. 21:8 - 9) Once she became espoused, she would no longer be viewed as a slave, but become the equal of any wife. Therefore the purchase of a female slave functioned more like the giving of a dowry. According to the Law, she was to be called a “wife.” (Ex. 21:10) And, if the buyer failed to treat the female slave with all the rights due an ordinary wife, he was required to set her free. (Ex. 21:11 NKJV)

Generally, marriage among slaves was not recognized but under The Law it was allowed and the families were kept intact. ***“If he comes in by himself, he shall go out by himself; if he comes in married, then his wife shall go out with him.”*** (Ex. 21:3 NKJV)

Of course, we can’t deny that slavery was still servitude. Ideally no one wishes to be viewed as someone else’s “property,” but this system did allow the poor – whom we know we will always have with us – to “earn a living” and be taken care of. Let’s remember also that the word of God was not intended – then or now – to abolish social order or make political

statements. It is meant to instruct God's people on how to live in a crooked and broken world: treating others fairly, always acting with compassion and generosity, going the extra mile.

2. Restitution – (Exodus 21:18-22:15)

Most of the laws concerning restitution (many repeated in greater detail in Leviticus and Deuteronomy) spell out exact penalties for offenses. For example, under general circumstances, an *“eye for an eye; a tooth for tooth; hand for hand, foot for foot, burn for burn, wound for wound, and stripe for stripe”* (Ex. 21:23-25) The list is notably specific. But, if someone had been burned and scarred because of someone else's negligence... Would the scarred person really want to see the offender burned to the same degree?

Even though these verses indicate that this is the maximum punishment, we see the judges (those 70 elders of Israel) seldom going that far. Instead, for example, when a man seriously injures another in a fight, he must pay for the victim's lost time and cover his medical expenses. (Ex. 21:18 & 19) So, it appears that the judges' job was to assess each case based on the circumstances, much like our judges do today.

Certainly today, we understand Christians must use maturity and discernment – especially in light of Jesus' teaching to forego the extent of The Law by an evildoer. *“You have heard that it was said, ‘an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth,’ but I tell you...”* (Matt. 5:38 - 42 NKJV) There is discussion about whether Jesus was speaking of this Old Testament law at this time or referring to newer principles of the first century. I don't know, but based on what we find in the books that follow Exodus it certainly could be the former.

As a former business owner, I sometimes had to mediate between workers who had work-related issues with one another. Deciding what is right and fair affects not only the ones involved in the dispute, but it can also affect the whole atmosphere of the business as well as set a precedent for how workers may expect to be treated in the future. Christians must take these kinds of decisions seriously because onlookers will draw their own conclusions about whether or not we are acting by the faith we claim to live by.

Obviously, we cannot anticipate every situation, but if we remember the second greatest commandment: *'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.'*, we're certainly starting in the right place.

3. Opportunities for the Poor – (Exodus 22:21-27 & 23:10-11)

Aliens, widows, and orphans are mentioned in Exodus 22:21-22. What did these three groups have in common? They did not possess land on which to support themselves. More often than not, this meant they were also poor. In Deuteronomy, God's concern for these three groups of vulnerable people called for Israel to provide them with justice (Deut. 10:18; 27:19) and food (Deut. 24:19-22). God's law on this matter is later seen in the following references: Isaiah 1:17, 23, 10:1-2; Jeremiah 5:28, 7:5-7, 22:3; Ezekiel 22:6-7; Zechariah 7:8-10; and Malachi 3:5. It appears to be one of the more important regulations!

From these scriptures we learn of the practice of allowing the poor to harvest, or "glean" the leftover grain from active fields. This "gleaning" was not a pre-prepared basket of food handed to each poor person; it was an opportunity for them to come along behind the harvesters and pick up "left-overs" (the owners having been instructed to not strip the field bare), enough to allow them to honorably support themselves by working with their hands. (Lev. 19:9-10) For example, an olive grove or a vineyard was to be harvested only once each season, (Deut. 24:20) and all growth after that was for the poor. They were entitled to gather what was left over, or perhaps what was of lesser quality or slower to ripen. This practice was not only an expression of kindness, but a matter of justice. Also, landowners were required to leave each field, vineyard, or orchard fallow one year in every seven; and the poor were allowed to harvest anything that might grow there at that time. (Ex. 23:10-11) I recommend reading the book of Ruth, whose story revolves around gleaning to enchanting effect. (Ruth 2:17-23)

Exodus reminds us that employing vulnerable workers is an essential part of what it means for a people to live under God's covenant. Christians have experienced God's

redemption, but our basic gratitude for God’s grace is certainly a powerful motive for finding creative ways to serve the needy around us.

4. Dealing with Lending and Collateral – (Exodus 22:25-27)

In Ex. 22:25-27 we see a needy member of God’s people who requires a financial loan. This loan will not be made according to the usual standards of money-lending. Instead, it will be given without “interest.” The Hebrew word “**neshek**” (translated “**usury**” in the KJV) in some contexts means a “**bite**” and has garnered a great deal of academic attention. Did “**neshekh**” refer to “excessive” and therefore unfair interest charged, on top of the reasonable amount of interest required to keep the practice of money-lending financially viable? Or did it refer to any interest at all? The text does not give us enough detail to conclusively determine what is actually meant. Most commentators believe “any interest” is the option that seems more likely. Their reasoning points to that word I mentioned above, “**neshekh**,” which almost always pertains to lending to those who are in miserable or vulnerable circumstances – meaning a category of people for whom paying any interest at all would be an excessive burden.

It certainly appears that putting the poor in a “never-ending cycle” of financial indebtedness stirs God’s feelings of compassion, and whether or not this law was good for business is not being considered here. Walter Brueggemann, in his notes, put it this way: “*The law does not argue about the economic viability of such a practice... it simply requires the need for care in concrete ways, and it expects the community to work out the practical details.*”

Notice this example from Exodus 22:26-27 of a man who had nothing but his only coat to offer as collateral for a loan: “***If you ever take your neighbor’s garment as a pledge, you shall return it to him before the sun goes down. For that is his only covering, it is his garment for his skin. What will he sleep in? And it will be that when he cries to Me, I will hear, for I am gracious.***” Rather than having the poor man bring the coat to the creditor every morning and pick it up every evening, doesn’t it sound more likely that the creditor could avoid the absurdity of this cycle by simply not expecting the borrower to put up any collateral at all?

It is certainly true that emotional concern without action doesn't give the poor the kind of help they need, and God wanted His people to honor Him by putting His laws into practice and serving real needs. James tells us "...*Faith without works is also dead!*" (James 2:26) And, by the same token, in Ephesians 4 we are told, "*Let him who stole steal no longer, but rather let him labor, working with his hands what is good, that he may have something to give him who has need.*" God heard the cry of the oppressed and He warned the Israelites that He would act upon it if they didn't. (Ex. 22:22-24) In today's society, we Christians are God's holy people, and as such must treat everyone well.

LAWS ABOUT THE SABBATH AND FESTIVALS – (Exodus 23:10 – 19)

After all the talk about working and helping others, this last section slows us down and reminds us that even our days of rest and celebration are holy to the Lord. Earlier in this lesson, we talked about how slaves were to be set free after 7 years. We also mentioned that fields were left fallow every seventh year. During this "Sabbath year" there was no planting or harvesting done, which means that during each of the six previous years, a portion of the harvest was "put aside" for that seventh year, and any produce needed during the seventh year must be purchased from others, because the fields were to be allowed to "rest" during that seventh year. It is a well-known fact that this practice restores nutrients to the soil. Jesus mentioned this idea in the New Testament when He said that the Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath. (See Mark 2:27) And, of course, He also declared Himself to be Lord of the Sabbath. (Matthew 12:8, Mark 2:28)

As a side note, because there is no mention of it here and lest we forget, there was also a "**Year of Jubilee.**" After the seventh "Sabbath Year" (49 years) the following year (50th) was the "Year of Jubilee." "*And you shall count seven sabbaths of years for yourself, seven times seven years; and the time of the seven sabbaths of years shall be to you forty-nine years. Then you shall cause the trumpet of the Jubilee to sound on the tenth day of the seventh month; on the Day of Atonement you shall make the trumpet to sound throughout all your land. And you shall consecrate the fiftieth year, and proclaim liberty throughout all the land to all its*

inhabitants. It shall be a Jubilee for you; and each of you shall return to his possession, and each of you shall return to his family.” (Leviticus 25:8 – 10 NKJV)

And at this point Jehovah briefly reiterates something of great importance...perhaps because He knew His people’s weaknesses: *“And in all that I have said to you, be circumspect and make no mention of the name of other gods, nor let it be heard from your mouth.”*

After that statement, Jehovah ordains three special feast days, and then makes two short statements in regard to the offerings made to Him –

The three special feast days were:

First: The Feast of Unleavened Bread right before the Passover to celebrate the bringing of His people out of Egypt.

Second: The Feast of the Harvest which occurs after the seasonal Fall harvest. It is similar to our celebration of Thanksgiving here in the United States. Ours is based on a historical event, but in other countries around the world, and under different names such as “The Harvest Holiday,” it is a time for the giving of thanks for the bounty that God has given. In ancient times it was celebrated with an offering of the first part of the harvest, with the hope that there would be more to help them get through the next year.

Third: The Feast of Ingathering at the end of the year when they would harvest their fruits (the Feast of the Harvest was for gathering of their grains). They would offer their firstfruits and their new wine as a sacrifice to the LORD as a show of faith that they believed that there was more where that came from and that the LORD would provide enough for them all year if they gave Him his part first.

The two statements in regard to offerings:

1. Only unleavened bread was to be offered as a grain offering to the LORD as there should never be any leaven mixed with the blood sacrifices. (We will see later that leaven is an image of sin and that would taint the purity of the sacrifice.)

2. The first fruits were for the Lord. – and the best among those. God will later, in the books of the prophets, reprimand His people for bringing to Him offerings and sacrifices that would not even be fit for their earthly kings – yet they expected Him to be pleased. (See Malachi 1:8) There is a pretty obvious lesson for us in this account as well.

Finally, we see a command about not boiling a baby goat in its mother's milk. There is no explanation given, but I think this was a pagan practice of the Canaanites and God knew they might be tempted to adopt it as well. A good example of something related is how we observe Christmas on Dec. 25th each year. We must be careful that we do not observe this “holiday” as a holy day since the dates and traditional way of celebrating Christmas are more closely associated with pagan traditions than with anything in the Bible. I'm not condemning anyone for celebrating Christmas, but I am suggesting we need to be careful how we celebrate and speak of our “feasts and festivals” so that we make it very clear we are not regarding them as holy events. The only “holy” event we honor and celebrate is the remembering of Jesus’ death, burial and resurrection every first day of the week.

And that brings us to Exodus 23:20: ***“Behold, I send an Angel before you to keep you in the way and to bring you into the place which I have prepared.*”**

The last 13 verses of chapter 20 are God’s promise of the conquest of Canaan that was first made to Abraham 430 years previously. And, as you might expect, commentators are divided on what is meant by this “Angel”. Some Jewish commentators believe it refers to the written law that had just been given to Moses (**The Book of the Covenant**). Others believe the Angel promised was Moses. A third group insists it was Joshua, because his name signifies an angel or messenger, and he was the one to lead them into the Promised Land.

However, the vast majority of commentators believe it was a true Angel – probably even Jesus – and that is why the word appears capitalized in the KJV, NKJV, and MKJV versions.

Notice the next verse following it: ***“Beware of Him and obey His voice; do not provoke Him, for He will not pardon your transgressions; for My name is in Him.”*** (Ex 20:21 NKJV)

In that verse the word “*is*” is italicized indicating it was not in the original manuscripts, but was placed there by the translators to simplify the meaning. Looking at verse 21, we see Jehovah saying that if He – the Angel – is provoked “*He will not pardon your transgressions;*” and that further suggests it was Jesus that guided them, for we know it is Jesus that judges us. “*When the Son of Man comes in His glory, and all the holy angels with Him, then He will sit on the throne of His glory. All the nations will be gathered before Him, and He will separate them one from another, as a shepherd divides his sheep from the goats.*” (Matthew 25:31 & 32 NKJV) I think we all would agree that the two expressions, “*He will not pardon your transgressions...*” and “*My name is in him*” would not be expressions used in regard to Moses or Joshua, nor do they point to **The Book of the Covenant**, or the “Ark of the Covenant,” or even “The written Law.”

It appears all too clear that Jehovah is speaking of a person, which, at least to me, brings another phrase contained in verse 20 into closer view: This Angel is to keep them “*in the way*” and will bring them to a place “*which I have prepared.*” I don’t believe, when God said this Angel will keep them “*in the way,*” He meant the Angel would simply “guide them through the wilderness” like a GPS system. Instead, I believe He meant that this Angel could prevent them from falling into any kind of wrong conduct—if they would seek His counsel. The similarities between “*keep you in the way,*” and Canaan being “*The Promised Land*” and Heaven being “The Promised Home of the faithful” is too close to ignore. You have probably sung the hymn “*To Canaan’s Land I’m On My Way.*” The place which Jehovah prepared for them “**flowed with milk and honey**” (a paradise compared to where they’ve come from) just as Heaven will be for the faithful. Jesus said, “**In My Father’s house are many mansions; if it were not so, I would have told you. I go to prepare a place for you.**” (John 14:2 NKJV)

The remainder of the chapter speaks of the physical things that Jehovah will do for them if they obey His words, including the driving out of their enemies: the Hivites, the Canaanites, and the Hittites presently living there. This statement in verse 33 certainly should have kept them on the right path: “*They shall not dwell in your land, lest they make you sin against Me, for if you serve their gods, it will surely be a snare to you.*” If only they had heeded His word...

In Summary of chapters 20 – 23:

Obviously, at least the first part of these “covenant-terms,” the “Decalogue” (more commonly known as the “Ten Commandments”) was spoken by the Divine voice of God as the Israelites stood trembling before the mountain. There were awe-inspiring thunderings, lightning flashes, and dark smoke that encompassed the mountain, accompanied by the sound of a trumpet. (Exodus 20:18) They were terrified, thinking they were about to die, so they asked Moses to address them instead of God – to “intercede” for them, if you will. So Moses went up into the mountain and received from Jehovah the rest of the “words and ordinances” that constitute the **Book of the Covenant.** (Exodus 20:22-23)

Earlier, I gave you four basic categories of laws. What follows below is a more detailed categorization of those laws. Even so, I still doubt the possibility of correctly arranging the material into hard-and-fast divisions:

- (1) Directions concerning worship, specifying prohibition of images and the form of altar for animal sacrifices (Ex 20:23-26)
- (2) Ordinances for the protection of Hebrew slaves, including “betrothal for a price.” (Ex 21:2-11)
- (3) Laws concerning injuries:
 - (a) To man by man (Ex 21:12-27)
 - (b) To man by beast (Ex 21:28-32)
 - (c) To beast by man (Ex 21:33, 14)
 - (d) To beast by beast (Ex 21:35, 36)
- (4) Ordinances concerning theft (Ex 22:1-4)
- (5) Ordinances concerning damage to a neighbor's property, including violence to his daughter. (Ex 22:5-17)
- (6) Various laws against profaning God’s name, under which is included proper worship, oppression and dutiful offering of first-fruits. (Ex 22:18-31)
- (7) Various forms of injustice and acts showing the lack of brotherliness. (Ex 23:1-9)

- (8) Festive requirements including the Sabbatical year and the three annual feasts of the Unleavened bread, First-fruits and Ingathering. (Ex 23:10 -17)
- (9) Warnings against certain wrong practices in their sacrifices. (Ex 23:18 & 19)
- (10) The promise of God's continual presence with them in the person of His Angel, and the consequent triumph over their enemies. (Ex 23:20-33)

And that brings us to chapter 24... Which some bible versions subtitle **“The Covenant Confirmed”** because in this chapter Moses reads the **Book of the Covenant** to the people and they respond **“All that the Lord has said we will do, and be obedient.”** (Ex. 24:7 NKJV) They had promised the same thing back in chapter 19:8.

I visualize chapter 24 as somewhat of a “summary” chapter even though it mentions some events for the first time as well as other events we have already seen, but that appear to be out of place chronologically. I believe that is because, when chapter 24 addresses the confirmation of the Covenant, it is referencing a prior event – the people agreeing to be obedient to the Covenant – as seen in chapter 19:8, but repeated in this chapter along with the blood sacrifice that sealed the agreement. It is my belief that prior to the blood sacrifice mentioned in this chapter Moses had already written what we have seen and described as **The Book of the Covenant**. That appears to be verified in this chapter, verse 4. As a matter of fact it is accepted that the things described in the opening verses have all already happened – even the building of the altar mentioned in verse 6 – prior to the offering of this sacrifice and the sealing of the Covenant.

Several times now we have used the word “covenant.” I suspect we all know the word means “agreement.” What we may not know, however, is that the Hebrew word **“berit”**, usually translated as “Covenant,” occurs 284 times in the Old Testament (according to Strong’s Concordance) and is defined as a “contract” or “agreement” between two parties – usually between God and His people. We see the word **“berit”** for the first time when God established a covenant with Noah and his descendants – which is everyone born since the flood including you

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and me – that He, God, would never again destroy the earth with a flood. The token or “sign” of that covenant is still with us today – the rainbow!

The next time we see the Hebrew word “**berit**” is when God made His covenant with Abram, and it was the agreement that Abram’s descendants would be given the Land of Canaan as a possession. We will see the culmination of that promise as we close our study of the book of Exodus, when the Israelites are led into Canaan by Joshua. There were other parts of that covenant between God and Abraham, and all have been fulfilled! The last of which when our Savior Jesus raised himself from the tomb to reign on His throne beside The Creator, opening the way for all who follow Him to live eternally in Heaven!

All of the events we have seen and discussed in this study thus far – from the time Moses was drawn to the Burning Bush up until now in chapter 24 – have happened in less than one year. In fact, most likely no more than 4 or 5 months have passed. We know Moses needed a little time to get to Egypt after the Burning Bush. Most agree the 10 plagues to convince the Pharaoh to let God’s people go only took 30 days, or maybe 45 at most. And, of course, it only took 60 or 61 days to get from Ramses in Egypt to Mt. Sinai where the Israelites are now in our study. The Israelites have been at Mt. Sinai for at least 5 days; possibly 8 or 10, but will remain here for awhile.

Jehovah’s plan was that the people would go quickly into the Promised Land. But sinful events altered that plan as we will soon see, and as it turns out, Moses will spend the last 40 years of his life in the wilderness as the people wander there. In fact, every adult who walked through the Red Sea on dry land will die in this wilderness except two – Joshua and Caleb. This was not God’s original intent, but disobedience and a lack of faith by the same people who promised “*All that the Lord has said we will do, and be obedient,*” changed everything.

We are not told exactly when Moses did his writing but the most common view is that he wrote daily notes (or perhaps kept a “diary”) of each event and conversation with Jehovah, and that may be true, but I suspect there were interventions of the Holy Spirit as well. With the Holy Spirit’s guidance it would be impossible for Moses to make a mistake, or omit due to forgetfulness, any of Jehovah’s words.

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Obviously, Moses had quickly written what is contained in chapters 21 – 23, because it is said in chapter 24 that *“Moses took the Book of the Covenant and read it in the hearing of the people.”* (Exodus 24:7 NKJV) We have already discussed that this **Book of the Covenant** is NOT the entire Law, but rather the general contract seen in these last 4 chapters, made between Jehovah and His people. The actual “books of the Law” are considered to be Exodus, Leviticus, and Numbers – then the majority of these laws are repeated again in Deuteronomy with additional explanations. That “more complete law” found in the books that follow Exodus elaborates more fully the intent of the Law we have just discussed.

Although Moses is often viewed as being the Lawgiver, the true Lawgiver is Jehovah. It was His law, given by Him to the Israelite nation through Moses who acted as the mediator between Jehovah and His people.

In verses 5 and 6 of Exodus 24, we see that Moses sent young men to gather oxen to be sacrificed as a “peace offering” to God, then Moses took half of the blood from the oxen and stored it in basins, and the other half was sprinkled on the altar. According to 24:8, after the people had agreed to be obedient to the law, Moses took the blood from the basins and sprinkled it on the people saying, *“This is the blood of the covenant which the Lord has made with you according to all these words.”* As it should, the **Book of the Covenant** occupies a fitting and clearly marked place in the Pentateuch.

There is one more item to discuss before I close this lesson: The common belief that Moses made no more than three trips up the mountain. I believe it is well documented here in chapters 19 - 24 that Moses made at least EIGHT. These 8 trips are NOT necessarily the only ones, but are all mentioned in chapters 19 - 24. The only stipulation that must be made for this number to be accurate is to assume that Moses ascended the mountain each time God spoke to him. Let’s look at each of these individually:

The First Trip –

Not long after the Israelites arrived at the base of Mount Sinai, Moses made his first trip up Mt. Sinai. It is described in Exodus 19:3 - 7: *“And Moses went up to God...”* I can picture

Moses taking large, purposeful steps as he ascended, eager to again commune with Jehovah. He had spoken with God in the Burning Bush at the base of this very mountain just a few months before, and no doubt was anxious to hear what further instructions the Lord might have.

During that short stay on the mountain God told Moses that He would offer a covenant to the people of Israel and would make them His own *“treasured possession”* and *“a kingdom of priests and a holy nation”* (verses 5–6) if they would keep His word. When Moses reported God’s message, the people responded by saying, *“We will do everything the Lord has said”* (Exodus 19:8).

The Second Trip –

“So Moses brought back the words of the people to the LORD.” He reported to God that the people had agreed to do as the Lord said. It is during this short stay atop Mount Sinai that God told Moses that He, Jehovah, would speak audibly in a thick cloud so that all the people could hear Him proclaim Moses as His chosen leader.

The Third Trip –

In the very next verse, Exodus 19:10, God again spoke to Moses, and told him to *“Go to the people and consecrate them today and tomorrow...”* That statement implies that Moses has again climbed Mt. Sinai, even though some commentators believe God’s words in verse 10 were part of the discourse seen in verse 9. I can’t agree with that because the last part of verse 9 indicates that Moses conferred with the people again, and they were not on the mountain! But, after God gave Moses the instructions to prepare for the Lord’s appearance on the mountain on the third day, it is said in verse 14 that *“Moses went down from the mountain to the people...”*

During the next two days, Moses stayed down with the people, and 19:16 describes God’s appearance on the mountain on the morning of the third day so the people could hear His voice: *“There were thunderings and lightnings, and a thick cloud on the mountain; and the sound of the trumpet was very loud, so that all the people who were in the camp trembled. And Moses brought the people out of the camp to meet with God, and they stood at the foot of the mountain. Mount Sinai was completely in smoke, because the LORD descended upon it in*

fire. Its smoke ascended like the smoke of a furnace, and the whole mountain quaked greatly. And when the blast of the trumpet sounded long and became louder and louder, Moses spoke, and God answered him by voice.” (Exodus 19:16 – 20 NKJV)

The Fourth Trip –

In Exodus 19:20 the text reads, *“And the Lord called Moses to the top of the mountain and Moses went up.”* This fourth trip up Mt. Sinai is described in verses 20 - 25. God came down onto the top of the mountain and summoned Moses up to tell him to warn the people not to break through the warning barriers and draw near the mountain while His presence was made manifest there. My supposition is that Jehovah, seeing into their hearts, knew some would try and die.

The way verse 23 is worded, along with God’s reaction, appears that Moses tried to interrupt God, saying in essence, *“I have already done that.”* This angered Jehovah and He told Moses to go *“away! Get down and then come up, you and Aaron with you, but do not let the priests and people break through to come up...”* (NKJV) Then, as verse 25 tells us, *“So Moses went down to the people and spoke to them.”*

It is while Moses is down with the people that *“God spoke all these words...”* (Ex. 20:1 NKJV) *“These words”* consisting of *“I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage...”* and then the audible delivery — to all the people – of the Ten Commandments. (Ex. 20:3–17)

But the people *“trembled and stood afar off.”* Even though they had witnessed their God’s power in the parting of the sea, and in the pillars of smoke and fire which had been leading them throughout their journey to get here, this was apparently different – so much more powerful and awe-inspiring that they could not stand before Him. (Ex. 20:18)

So, they pleaded with Moses to intercede for them, to be God's spokesman, so they would not have to stand terrified before Jehovah. (Verses 18 & 19) Moses told them that God was testing them so that they would fear Him and not sin. (Verse 20) And, even though the people *“stood afar off,”* Moses drew near the thick darkness where God was.

The Fifth Trip –

As seen above, Moses ascended the mountain for the 5th time. While it is mentioned that this would have been the trip with Aaron, (Ex. 19:24) most commentators believe Aaron did not go all the way up to stand in the presence of God.

It is here that Moses was given the various laws recorded in the rest of chapter 20 and the next three chapters, 21 – 23, along with a promise to lead them to the land of Canaan as we discussed earlier.

It is my supposition that even though Aaron was not by Moses' side, he was close enough to hear Jehovah speaking to Moses and delivering all of those various laws. Aaron was destined to become the High Priest for the Israelites, so it was proper for him to hear them. He, in his role as High Priest, needed to know those laws. Certainly, Moses was going to write them into the **Book of the Covenant**, but Aaron could now testify to God's having directly imparted the laws to Moses.

The Sixth Trip –

It is in Exodus 24:1 that Moses was again summoned to climb Mt. Sinai. This time he was to bring not only Aaron, but also his sons Nadab and Abihu (who would be serving as priests under Aaron) and seventy of the elders of Israel with him. Very likely, these 70 elders were the "judges" spoken of earlier.

As before with Aaron, Moses' entourage was not to go all the way to the top of the mountain, for if they saw God, they would die. Most likely, they stopped where Aaron did on the previous trip – worshipping from afar. Moses alone was to go all the way and meet with Jehovah.

We are not told what was said to Moses on this trip, but because of what follows, I believe Jehovah repeated to him all the laws contained in chapters 20 through 23, in the hearing of Aaron (again) AND the priests Nadab and Abihu, AND the seventy elders who would be serving as "judges," so all of them could attest to the voice of God having decreed how they

should conduct themselves. Again, we are not told how long they were up there, but I suspect it may have been all day.

We see in chapter 24, verse 3, Moses came down the mountain and *“told the people all the words of the Lord and all the judgments.”* We are also told that *“Moses wrote all the words of the Lord.”* This would be the **Book of the Covenant** we have already discussed at length.

Verse 4 of chapter 24 also tells us that Moses *“arose early in the morning and built an altar at the foot of the mountain, and made twelve pillars according to the twelve tribes of Israel.”* He sent young men of the children of Israel – *“who offered the burnt offerings and sacrificed peace offerings of oxen to the Lord.”* This is the first we hear of the sacrifice of burnt offerings, but since the wording is in the past tense, it suggests they had already been doing this. Remember, when Moses was asking Pharaoh to release his people, he said they needed to get three days away so they could make their sacrifices and burnt offerings without the Egyptians seeing them and becoming disturbed by the killing of cattle – which the Egyptians worshiped. Therefore, I can only conclude that the people had been making offerings all along as they journeyed from Ramses to where they are now.

So... the next morning, Moses offered these burnt offerings and fellowship offerings and read the **Book of the Covenant** to the people, who responded, *“We will do everything the Lord has said; we will obey.”* (Verse 7) To ratify the covenant, Moses sprinkled the people with the blood of the sacrifice. (Verse 8) Blood is a symbol of life, and it is what “sealed” the making of the covenant between Jehovah and the people. I believe it is also the punishment for breaking the covenant on the part of the people.

The Seventh Trip –

After the ceremony, Moses, Aaron, Nadab, Abihu, and the elders ascended the mountain again, (verse 9) and this time they “saw the God of Israel” – but obviously not His face, because they would have died had they seen His face. (Ex. 33:20) What they did see was this: *“under His feet as if it were a paved work of sapphire stone, and it was like the very heavens in its clarity. But on the nobles of the children of Israel He did not lay His hand. So they saw God,*

and they ate and drank.” (Ex. 24:10 & 11 NKJV) They didn’t see the rugged ground of the mountain, but saw instead what might resemble a “sapphire stone pavement.” In Biblical imagery the sapphire represents truth, faithfulness, and sincerity, and sometimes associated with Divine favor.

The Eighth Trip –

Even though we have not been told that Moses, Aaron and the others came down from the mountain, we are told in verse 12 that Jehovah invited Moses to *“come up to me on the mountain”* and in verse 13, *“Moses rose up, and his minister Joshua: and Moses went up into the mount of God.”* (KJV) Since Moses told the elders, *“Wait here for us until we come back to you. Indeed, Aaron and Hur are with you. If any man has a difficulty, let him go to them,”* we can see that they have returned and that Moses (with Joshua this time) is making that trek up the steep mountain to confer with Jehovah for the eighth time.

Verse 12 gives us the reason for this trip: *“Then the LORD said to Moses, “Come up to Me on the mountain and be there; and I will give you tablets of stone, and the law and commandments which I have written, that you may teach them.”*

As on previous trips when Moses was instructed to bring other people with him, we can assume from a later verse, Ex 32:16-18, that Joshua did not accompany Moses all the way to the top, but that he rejoined him on the way down. It is on this most famous of the trips to the top, that Moses received the stone tablets that God had prepared. (Ex. 24:12) But first, for six days a cloud covered the top of the mountain and Moses – alone having left Joshua farther below – waited outside the cloud for his instructions. Then, on the seventh day, God called Moses to enter the cloud and approach the top of the mountain. Moses stayed there for 40 days and 40 nights (verse 18).

During this lengthy meeting, Jehovah gave Moses much more than just the Ten Commandments! They were certainly included; in fact God Himself etched them on two tablets of stone. But Moses also received complete instructions on how to build the tabernacle, the Ark

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of the Covenant, as well as the altar. He was also given the specifications for the priestly garments, and all the furniture for the tabernacle. (Exodus 24 - 31)

Unfortunately, at the foot of the mountain, those 40 days without their leader were just too much for the weak faith of the Israelites. They convinced Aaron to build the golden calf and the Lord called Moses down from the mountain to see it for himself. It is then that he broke the stone tablets in anger, destroyed the golden calf, and disciplined the people.

I will close the lesson with this thought: The events at Mt. Sinai were monumental in the history of the world. God was creating for Himself a new nation with new laws and a new way of life. In giving the Law, God revealed His holiness, clearly defined sin, (Romans 7:7) and provided a guardian to eventually bring us to Christ! (Galatians 3:24–25)

And, at this time Jehovah showed Himself to be a God who desires to communicate and forge a relationship with His people. In our time, He speaks to us and guides us through His written word. If we obey, we can count on an eternity in “Canaan’s Land”... “where the soul of man never dies”.