

## **The Hebrew Law and Covenant Exodus and Deuteronomy (ca. 950-450 B.C.E.)**

Moses, the greatest of the Hebrew prophets, is revered by Jews, Christians, and Muslims alike. After Moses led his people out of bondage in Egypt, the Hebrew God revealed a series of commandments to Moses on Mount Sinai. This was not the first occasion when their God handed down moral commandments to His people, but it was here that He forbade His people to worship other gods. The passage thus establishes monotheism, the worship of and belief in only one god, as the central tenet of the Hebrew religion. At the same time, it identifies the Hebrews as God's chosen people.

On the morning of the third day, there was thunder and lightning, with a thick cloud over the mountain and a very loud trumpet blast. Everyone in the camp trembled. Then Moses led the people out of the camp to meet with God, and they stood at the foot of the mountain. Mount Sinai was covered with smoke, because the Lord descended on it in fire. The smoke billowed up from it like smoke from a furnace; the whole mountain trembled violently, and the sound of the trumpet grew louder and louder. Then Moses spoke, and the voice of God answered him.

The Lord descended to the top of Mount Sinai and called Moses to the top of the mountain. So, Moses went up, and the Lord said to him, "Go down and warn the people so they do not force their way through to see the Lord and many of them perish. Even the priests, who approach the Lord, must consecrate themselves, or the Lord will break out against them."

Moses said to the Lord, "The people cannot come up Mount Sinai because you yourself warned us, 'Put limits around the mountain and set it apart as holy.'"

The Lord replied, "Go down and bring Aaron up with you. But the priests and the people must not force their way through to come up to the Lord, or he will break out against them."

So Moses went down to the people and told them. And God spoke all these words: "I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery.

"You shall have no other gods before me.

"You shall not make for yourself an idol in the form of anything in heaven above, or the earth beneath, or in the waters below. You all do not bow down to them or worship them; for I, the Lord your God, am a jealous God, punishing the children for the sin of the fathers to the third and fourth generation of those who hate me, but showing love to a thousand [generations] of those who love me and keep my commandments.

"You shall not misuse the name of the Lord your God, for the Lord will not hold anyone guiltless who misuses his name.

"Remember the Sabbath day by keeping it holy. Six days, you shall labor and do all your work, but the seventh day is a Sabbath to the Lord your God. On it, you shall not do any work, neither you, nor your son or daughter, nor your man-servant or maidservant, nor your animals, nor the alien within your gates. For in six days, the Lord made the

heavens and the earth, the sea, and all that is in them, but he rested on the seventh day. Therefore, the Lord blessed the Sabbath day and made it holy.

"Honor your father and your mother so that you may live long in the land the Lord your God is giving you.

"You shall not murder.

"You shall not commit adultery.

"You shall not give false testimony against your neighbor.

"You shall not covet your neighbor's house, his wife, his manservant or maidservant, his ox or donkey, or anything that belongs to your neighbor."

When the people saw the thunder and lightning and heard the trumpet, and saw the mountain in smoke, they trembled with fear. They stayed at a distance and said to Moses, "Speak to us yourself, and we will listen. But do not have God speak to us, or we will die."

Moses said to the people, "Do not be afraid. God has come to test you so that the fear of God will be with you to keep you from sinning."

The people remained at a distance while Moses approached the thick dark-ness where God was.

[After giving the Hebrews the law, Moses also tells the Hebrews what will happen if they obey or disobey their God.]

If you fully obey the Lord your God and carefully follow all his commands I give you today, the Lord your God will set you high above all the nations on earth. All these blessings will come upon you and accompany you if you obey the Lord your God: You will be blessed in the city and blessed in the country.

### Study Questions

1. Consider the description of God's descent upon Mount Sinai in the following passage: "And the Lord said to Moses, 'Go down and warn the people so they don't force their way through to see the Lord and many of them perish.' " What does this passage reveal about the Hebrews' conception of their God's power?
2. Why does God forbid the creation and worship of idols?
3. What incentive are there for the Hebrews to obey their God's commands?

---

From Exodus 19:16-25; 20:1-21; Deuteronomy 28:1-9; 15-26.