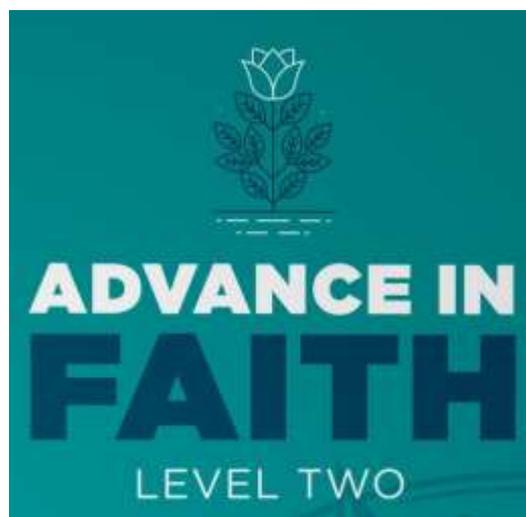


Book of Exodus

Week 4 — Covenant

(Exodus 21–25)



Introduction

God has brought his people out of slavery into his governance, drowning Pharaoh's military might at the Red Sea. He has responded to their petitions for food, water, and protection. He has brought them to the place where Moses discovered God in residence at his wilderness palace—Mount Sinai. There he spoke to his nation, outlining what kind of people they were to be (Ten Commandments).

Exodus 21–23 contains further examples of the laws he expects his people to live by. This section is *the Book of the Covenant* (24:7). God expects the people to make the commitment that binds God and Israel together legally—as king and people. (Remember, people in the ancient world made covenants with rulers, not gods.)

Once they have made the covenant commitment (24:1-8), the leaders are invited into God's palace on Mount Sinai to share a meal with him (25:9-11). God then gives instructions on how to build a tent where their heavenly king can live among them and direct his people.

Laws of the covenant (Exodus 21 – 23)

Gaining perspective on the law (Exodus 21)

Casuistic law (case studies)

Israel's laws were much briefer than the laws of Australia, because they take a very different approach. We pass laws to cover every situation. When a new situation arises (e.g. via medical technology), we introduce new legislation.

Israel's laws made no attempt to be comprehensive. Instead, they represented **samples of justice**. When a situation arose that was not directly covered by those laws, the leaders used the existing examples to figure out how to give justice in the new situation.

Consequently, most of Israel's laws were case laws (casuistic), i.e.:

When this situation arises, this is how to apply justice.

Example:

Exodus 21:18–19 (ESV)

¹⁸ When men quarrel and one strikes the other with a stone or with his fist and the man does not die but takes to his bed,
¹⁹ then if the man rises again and walks outdoors with his staff, he who struck him shall be clear; only he shall pay for the loss of his time, and shall have him thoroughly healed.

The crucial idea is that the person responsible for the problem must pay, but the restitution is limited to actual damage caused.

Lex talionis (eye for an eye)**Exodus 21:23–25 (ESV)**

²³ But if there is harm, then you shall pay life for life,

²⁴ eye for eye, tooth for tooth, hand for hand, foot for foot,

²⁵ burn for burn, wound for wound, stripe for stripe.

The intent is that the one who caused the loss suffers the same loss (*lex talionis* = law of retaliation). The goal is to limit violence: a person cannot seek sevenfold or seventy-sevenfold restitution (compare Genesis 4:23-24).

On this basis, Israel's law mandates **capital punishment**. This was the norm among the nations of the ancient world. The death penalty was not God's original ideal: God protected the first murderer (Cain), giving him a protective mark so the community would not kill him (Genesis 4:16).¹ Nevertheless, God later permitted the community to take a murderer's life in order to limit violence (Genesis 9:5-6).²

Why Slavery?**Exodus 21:1–2 (ESV)**

¹ Now these are the rules that you shall set before them.

² When you buy a Hebrew slave, he shall serve six years, and in the seventh he shall go out free, for nothing.

If God was establishing his own nation with his perfect law, why would he legislate laws that permit slavery?

Bear in mind that this was not happening in a vacuum. Establishing the nation of Israel is only step one of God's plan to reconstitute earth under his reign. God does not radically change every social structure of the fallen world in this first step.

Consequently, it's useful to compare God's laws for Israel with the laws of other nations in the Ancient Near East (ANE). Ask:

What's the same, and what's difference?

Other nations had slaves. It was an ancient form of bankruptcy: if someone could not pay their debt, they worked it off. Others were born slaves and stayed slaves for life. So having slaves was not something God introduced for Israel: it was the part of their world.

What's different in Exodus is that a slave serve a maximum of 7 years to pay off their debt, and they received half wage during this time (Deuteronomy 15:18). This prevented a class structure where some Hebrews were land-owners and others were slaves.

¹ allenbrowne.blog/2016/05/20/what-kind-of-world-is-god-running-genesis-41-15/

² allenbrowne.blog/2016/06/06/what-about-capital-punishment-genesis-96/

This was radically different to other nations. For example, the Greek philosopher Aristotle argued some people were born to be slaves:

... whether it is advantageous and just for anyone to be a slave, or whether on the contrary all slavery is against nature. ... Authority and subordination are conditions not only inevitable but also expedient; in some cases things are marked out from the moment of birth to rule or to be ruled.³

So what’s the same and what’s different compared to other nations? God permitted Israel to have slaves like the nations, but he specified a time limit that prevented Hebrews from becoming a class of slaves.

They had been slaves like that in Egypt. They were never to treat each other like that again.

In summary, the laws in the Book of the Covenant accepted the societal structures of the ancient near east and sought to establish some justice within them. They did not aim to create the ideal society without slavery, gender inequality or other evils. They aim to limit these injustices (e.g. limiting slavery to 7 years).

What the law reveals about God (Exodus 22 – 23)

God is our ruler

We cannot examine each law in detail, but there’s an interesting translation issue in 22:8-9. The Hebrew word ***elohim*** is normally translated “God” or “gods.” But it can be used of other rulers (human or angelic). The NIV therefore translates it as *the judges*:

| Exodus 22:9 (NIV) | Exodus 22:9 (ESV) |
|--|--|
| ... both parties are to bring their cases before the judges (<i>elohim</i>). The one whom the judges (<i>elohim</i>) declare guilty must pay back double to the other. | ... the case of both parties shall come before God (<i>elohim</i>). The one whom God (<i>elohim</i>) condemns shall pay double to his neighbour. |

It’s dealing with a theft case where there is no hard evidence so it’s one person’s word against another. It requires the people to appear before *elohim*. It’s possible this means to appear at the temple (where God is) though there is no temple or tabernacle at this point of the story. Alternatively, it may be requiring them to appear before the “rulers” of the nation to speak the truth (like a statutory declaration).⁴

³ Aristotle, *Aristotle in 23 Volumes, Translated by H. Rackham.*, vol. 21 (Medford, MA: Cambridge, MA, Harvard University Press; London, William Heinemann Ltd., 1944). [Aristot., Pol. 1254a.1–24]

⁴ The NIV translation is supported by the fact that the verb condemn (*rā-šā*) is plural, which would be unusual if a singular subject God was intended.

The most important thing to realize is that the ANE world did not separate “church” and “state” as we do. God was their *ruler*. Keep that in mind with statements like the first commandment:

Exodus 20:2-3

I am YHWH your ruler (*elohim*) who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery.

You shall have no other rulers (*elohim*) ahead of me.

Social justice

These rulers stand with the authority of God to ensure justice for his people. This concern for social justice is everywhere in Israel’s law. Particularly, God shows concern for foreigners, widows, and orphans (22:21-24). These were the people who did not own land, and so were unable to provide for themselves.

Other nations shared some social justice concerns. For example, the Canaanites had a myth about King Keret who ill because he failed to care for the underprivileged among his people. The myth says:

You have been brought down by your failing power.
 You do not judge the cause of the widow,
 you do not try the case of the importunate.
 You do not banish the extortioners of the poor,
 you do not feed the orphan before your face
 nor the widow behind your back.⁵

Israel’s laws show a stronger and more persistent sense of social justice than the nations. This concern for social justice reflects the character of their heavenly sovereign.

National holidays

Israel’s laws also mandated the nation’s holidays. Even in English, the word “holiday” derives from “holy day.”

As well as the weekly Sabbath (Saturday), they were to down tools and gather together for three festivals each year (23:10-19):

- **Passover**, Unleavened Bread (*Pesach*) around Easter
- **Pentecost**, Feast of Weeks (*Shavuot*) 50 days later
- Feast of **Tabernacles** (*Sukkot*) around October.

You already know about Passover from Exodus 12. The other two are harvest celebration festivals.

God is someone who wants his people to celebrate and feast together.

⁵ John C. L. Gibson and Godfrey Rolles Driver, *Canaanite Myths and Legends: Translation*, 2nd ed. (London: T&T Clark, 2004), 102.

The Promised Land (23:20-32)

The people were to live by these laws in the land their sovereign ruler had promised to them. He promised to send his messenger ahead to protect them and to drive out the existing inhabitants in the land.

He calls Israel into exclusive covenant relationship with himself as their sovereign. They are to:

- refuse to serve other rulers (*elohim*) (23:24)
- serve YHWH their ruler (*elohim*) trusting his provision (23:25)
- make no covenant with other rulers (*elohim*) (25:33).

Remember that other people made covenants with their human rulers, not their gods. These commands are as political as they are religious. The significance of these commands becomes obvious later in the prophets like Isaiah who declare that submitting to other rulers is idolatry, i.e. failing to recognize their true ruler (*elohim*) and putting other rulers (*elohim*) before him.

Jewish versus Christian reading of the law

For over 3000 years, Jewish society has been founded on these laws. Many Jews today are non-religious, but still value their cultural traditions, such as gathering for a family celebration on Friday evening (the beginning of the Sabbath).

Other Jews seek to observe the Torah—both the written law and the interpretations by the rabbis as recorded in the Talmud. The rabbis identified **613 mitzvot** (commands).⁶ For each one, they prescribe who should obey this law (priests? Jewish men? women? children? gentiles?), and how often (constantly? weekly? annually? once?)

Consider this example, which occurs 3 times in the Torah:

Exodus 23:19; 34:26; Deuteronomy 14:21

You shall not boil a young goat in its mother's milk.

It's a curious prohibition. Presumably this act had some religious significance to the Canaanites whose religion they were not to copy.

But the rabbis decided the only way to be sure this law was kept was to never eat meat and dairy products in the same meal. Observant Jews therefore have two completely separate sets of dishes in their kitchen to prevent any possible cross-contamination:

The interdiction of boiling a kid in its mother's milk was generalized to outlaw the mixing of all meat and milk (meaning all dairy products).⁷

⁶ <http://www.jewfaq.org/613.htm>

⁷ Nahum M. Sarna, *Exodus*, JPS Torah Commentary (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1991), 147.

Christians read the same texts differently. God never gave these commands to gentiles, so we don't try to observe them literally.

Christians do not look at the laws God gave Israel as the ideal. They reveal something of God's character. But with slavery, we need to look back to the earlier chapters of Genesis for a more complete picture of our sovereign's ideals for his kingdom.⁸

That's true of gender issues as well. Israel's laws assume a culture in which a man owned his wife, having paid the bride's father for her. This is nothing like the divine ideal of equality expressed in the beginning where men and women do not rule over each other but jointly and equally rule over God's creation as his image (Genesis 1:26-28).⁹

Jesus used this principle of interpretation. He reached back beyond what was permitted in the Torah to find the kingdom ideal—the way God designed life to be in the beginning:

Matthew 19:8 Moses allowed you to divorce your wives, but from the beginning it was not so.

Jesus didn't only do this with divorce. The whole Jewish law rested on the principle of just retribution (*lex talionis*), but Jesus questioned that principle as an inadequate expression of God's heart:

Matthew 5:38–39 (ESV)

³⁸ “You have heard that it was said, ‘An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.’ ³⁹ But I say to you ...

If *lex talionis* is the basis of justice, the whole world will end up blind and toothless. (Even Ghandi understood that.)

The laws God gave Israel are **not his kingdom ideals** and are **not directly transferable** to Christian individuals or nations today. They reveal something of God's character, but they are not definitive for us.

Committing to God's kingship (Exodus 24)

The third covenant (24:1-8)

The first covenant in Scripture was God's promise to Noah and his descendants (all humanity) that he will never give up ruling them.¹⁰

The second covenant with Abraham was the promise that God would do this through his descendants.¹¹

⁸ On the origin of slavery in Scripture, see allenbrowne.blog/2016/06/10/noah-is-a-flawed-ruler-genesis-918-29/

⁹ allenbrowne.blog/2016/05/09/what-it-means-to-be-human-genesis-1/

¹⁰ allenbrowne.blog/2016/06/08/gods-commitment-to-reign-genesis-97-17/

¹¹ allenbrowne.blog/2016/07/20/covenant-with-abram-genesis-157-21/ allenbrowne.blog/2016/08/05/gods-commitment-to-rule/

The covenant enacted here at Sinai establishes Israel (the descendants of Jacob) as God's nation. It was because of his covenant with Abraham (Ex 2:24; 3:6, 15-16; 4:5; 6:3, 8) that YHWH rescued his people from Pharaoh's rule, and brought them to his mountain palace (Mount Sinai) where he declared they would be his people/nation and he would be their God/ruler (19:5-6).

In the covenant ceremony, Israel agrees to be the kind of society stipulated in the Book of the Covenant. The formal covenant ceremony has established them as the kingdom of God, with YHWH as their law-giver:

Exodus 24:3, 7 (NIV)

³ When Moses went and told the people all the LORD's words and laws, they responded with one voice,

"Everything the LORD has said we will do." ...

⁷ Then he took the Book of the Covenant and read it to the people. They responded, "We will do everything the LORD has said; we will obey."

The covenant is formalized by offering gifts to their sovereign (24:5):

- **burnt offerings** (an aroma rising to the heavens),
- **fellowship offerings** (a meal eaten in fellowship with God).

This is how people gave offerings to their gods in the ancient world, so Israel naturally offers sacrificial gifts to their God. But Scripture does not say it's something God required; rather that God accepted what they offered. (There are laws later about how to offer sacrifices, but it does not originate as God's idea.)

A meal with God (24:9-18)

Now that Israel has entered into the covenant, the king invites them into his palace. What do you make of this?

Exodus 24:9-11 (NIV)

⁹ Moses and Aaron, Nadab and Abihu, and the seventy elders of Israel went up ¹⁰ and saw the God of Israel.

Under his feet was something like a pavement made of lapis lazuli, as bright blue as the sky. ¹¹ But God did not raise his hand against these leaders of the Israelites; they saw God, and they ate and drank.

The leaders of Israel have been invited into the palace on Mount Sinai, and they have seen their sovereign—at least his feet as he towered above them on the great pavement of the sky.



Ancient Hittite covenant document:
Treaty of Kadesh (Istanbul Museum)

Not since Eden has the great ruler dwelt among his people like this! Humanity was expelled from Eden's garden when they broke faith with their sovereign. He posted cherubim to guard the way to the divine presence (Genesis 3:24).¹² But this covenant restores relationship between the heavenly sovereign and his nation, so they can enter God's presence and he does not raise a hand against them!

This tiny nation was now the hope of the world.

A house for their king (Exodus 25)

Moses and the leaders of Israel have been invited into God's mountain palace for a meal that celebrates the covenant in a way no one has known since Eden.

Their king gives them their first task: to build a tent for him to live among them and lead them as their king. This tabernacle is a *temple*, for YHWH is their God. It is also a *palace*, for YHWH is their king.

The people are asked to contribute the materials for their sovereign's house (25:1-9). The heavenly king specifies what would be a suitable dwelling for him to live among them. It's modelled on the palace they saw on God's mountain:

Exodus 25:40 (NIV)

See that you make them according to the pattern shown you on the mountain.

So Moses returns up the mountain, to receive instructions from the divine king regarding the house they are to build for him (24:8, 18). But one piece of furniture is so important that eclipses the tent itself.

Ark: marker of God's throne (25:10-22)

The most important element of the palace is the throne. That's what *the ark of the covenant* was — a throne for their sovereign, or at least the footstool of his throne (25:10-22).

The ark was a rectangular timber chest (about 1100 x 680 x 680 mm), overlaid with gold (25:10-16).¹³

Inside this chest were two stone tablets—legal testimony to the covenant between YHWH as ruler and Israel as the nation committed to living



¹² <https://allenbrowne.blog/2016/05/18/what-changed-with-the-rebellion-genesis-315-24/>

¹³ Image source: *Rose Then and Now Bible Map Atlas with Biblical Background and Culture* edited by Paul H. Wright (Torrance, CA: Rose Publishing, 2012), 57.

under his law. It was therefore called *the ark of the testimony* (ESV) or *the ark of the covenant law* (NIV). See Exodus **25:16, 21-22; 26:33-34; 30:6, 26; 31:7; 39:35; 40:3, 5, 20-21**. Later it was called *the ark of the covenant* (Num 10:33; 14:44; Deut 10:8; 31:9, 25-26).

The lid of the ark was the *kăp-pō-rět*, meaning *cover*. The word could be used literally for a cover (a lid), or metaphorically for covering a debt or an offence (forgiving). It therefore came to mean setting relationship right, reconciling, atoning.

Some translations (KJV, ESV) call it the *mercy seat*, since it was the seat of God's throne and the place where his mercy covered offences. But *atonement cover* (NIV) captures the sense better. It also helps us make the connection with the Day of Atonement (*Yom Kippur*).

In summary, the *cover* on the ark symbolized their heavenly sovereign *covering* their offences (forgiving), maintaining relationship with his covenant people (atonement).

Two hammered gold **cherubim** rose from the sides of the *kăp-pō-rět*. We've already met the cherubim as protectors of God's holy presence (Genesis 3:24). Their outspread wings symbolized the holy space over the ark (25:17-21), where YHWH reigns:

1 Samuel 4:4 So the people sent men to Shiloh, and they brought back the ark of the covenant of the LORD Almighty, who is **enthroned between the cherubim**.¹⁴

God reigns over the heavens and the earth.

Thrones in the ancient world had footstools attached.

Solomon's throne is described like this:

2 Chronicles 9:18 (NIV)

The throne had six steps, and a **footstool** of gold was attached to it. On both sides of the seat were armrests, with a lion standing beside each of them.

God's throne is in heaven, and the earth is under his feet (Isaiah 66:1). The ark represents the earthly footstool of the heavenly throne, with the guardian cherubs on each side.

Israel's heavenly king directed his nation from his throne, this holy space between the cherubim (also Numbers 7:89):

Exodus 25:22 (NIV)

There, above the cover between the two cherubim that are over the ark of the covenant law, **I will meet with you and give you all my commands** for the Israelites.



Egyptian throne with footstool
(Tutankhamun exhibition)

¹⁴ See also 2 Samuel 6:2; 2 Kings 19:15; 1 Chronicles 13:6; Psalm 80:1; 99:1; Isaiah 37:16

The ark was lost when Babylon invaded. Whether the Babylonians destroyed it or carried it off as loot, Jeremiah instructed Israel not to make another one, for he promised that YHWH would expand his throne from this small box to the entire city of Jerusalem (Jeremiah 3:16-17). Isaiah envisioned earth as God's footstool (Isaiah 66:1).

Bread table & lampstand: markers of God's presence (25:23-40)

When the king is in residence, the lights are on and there's food on the table. The king's tent therefore needed a table for the bread that indicated the divine presence (25:30), and a golden lampstand to light the interior—a symbol of the king's presence and guiding wisdom.



Conclusion

The Sinai covenant was a pact between the heavenly king and his people. This pact established Israel as a nation, under YHWH's reign. Israel was the representative kingdom of God on earth—representing YHWH to the other nations that also belonged under his rule.

After hearing the stipulations of the covenant, Israel signed up, committing themselves to obey the laws of their king. The king then invited the leaders of Israel into his Sinai palace for a meal to celebrate their newly established fellowship with him.

Their king then instructed them in how to build a tent for him to live among them. First priority was constructing the ark of the covenant—an ornamented chest that held the founding document of the covenant, the Ten Commandments. The lid of the ark is the atonement cover, celebrating the fellowship between the divine king and his nation.

The ark represented the divine throne. With guardian angels on each side, the ark was his footstool—the place for the heavenly king to rest his feet. That's significant: if the king is at rest, the kingdom is at rest.

The other furniture also represented the king's presence among his people: the table for the bread of the presence, and the lampstand.

The tabernacle was a celebration of YHWH's kingship. The Sinai covenant established his kingship over Israel. The goal of the Bible's story is the reestablishment of his kingship over the earth.

That's what Jesus meant by "the kingdom of God." It's bigger than Israel: it's *all nations* coming under his authority (Matthew 28:19). We look forward to the day when everyone acknowledges God's kingship through his anointed ruler, Jesus Christ the Lord:

Revelation 21:3 (NIV) I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, "Look! **God's dwelling place** is now among the people, and he will dwell with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God [ruler]."

Memory verse

Exodus 24:7 (NIV)

Then he took the Book of the Covenant and read it to the people.
They responded, “We will do everything the LORD has said; we will obey.”

Take home exercise

Spend some time meditating on what it meant to have God living among people again, in the tabernacle. No one had known such a thing since Eden.

To help you with that meditation, here’s how a Jewish writer describes the significance of the ark:

At either end of the *kapporet* [atonement cover] a cherub was hammered out. The two cherubim faced each other, with their heads bent slightly downward. Their fully outstretched wings were turned upward, sheltering the main body of the lid and the Ark below it. Verse 22 as well as Numbers 7:89 make clear that the divine voice was thought to issue from the space above the lid and between the two cherubim. Therefore, just as the Ark may poetically be the footstool, the *kapporet* with its cherubim would support the invisible throne of God. This explains a frequently employed epithet of God as the One who is “Enthroned on the Cherubim.” ...

The cherubim of the Tabernacle certainly communicate some concepts of God that are fundamental to the religion of Israel. As bearers of the celestial throne, they evoke belief in divine, transcendent sovereignty. Their permanent place above the Ark expresses God’s immanence—His enduring presence in the covenanted community of Israel. Their outstretched wings represent the idea of consummate mobility, that is, of God’s omnipresence.

The imagery of the footstool and throne evoke the conception of God as King. In this capacity, He issues His royal decrees to Israel through the instrumentality of Moses. Hence, God may be said to “meet” with Moses by the Ark and *kapporet*, a function of the latter object that is repeated several times. This gave rise to the term *’ohel mo’ed*, “Tent of Meeting,” as an alternative designation for the Tabernacle.¹⁵

¹⁵ Nahum M. Sarna, *Exodus*, The JPS Torah Commentary (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1991), 161–162.