

# The Mount Sinai Covenant



Exegesis of Exodus 24:1-11

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## I. Introduction

### Exodus 24:1-11 (NRSVCE)

24 Then he said to Moses, “Come up to the Lord, you and Aaron, Nadab, and Abihu, and seventy of the elders of Israel, and worship at a distance. <sup>2</sup> Moses alone shall come near the Lord; but the others shall not come near, and the people shall not come up with him.” <sup>3</sup> Moses came and told the people all the words of the Lord and all the ordinances; and all the people answered with one voice, and said, “All the words that the Lord has spoken we will do.” <sup>4</sup> And Moses wrote down all the words of the Lord. He rose early in the morning, and built an altar at the foot of the mountain, and set up twelve pillars, corresponding to the twelve tribes of Israel. <sup>5</sup> He sent young men of the people of Israel, who offered burnt offerings and sacrificed oxen as offerings of well-being to the Lord. <sup>6</sup> Moses took half of the blood and put it in basins, and half of the blood he dashed against the altar. <sup>7</sup> Then he took the book of the covenant, and read it in the hearing of the people; and they said, “All that the Lord has spoken we will do, and we will be obedient.” <sup>8</sup> Moses took the blood and dashed it on the people, and said, “See the blood of the covenant that the Lord has made with you in accordance with all these words.” <sup>9</sup> Then Moses and Aaron, Nadab, and Abihu, and seventy of the elders of Israel went up, <sup>10</sup> and they saw the God of Israel. Under his feet there was something like a pavement of sapphire stone, like the very heaven for clearness. <sup>11</sup> God did not lay his hand on the chief men of the people of Israel; also they beheld God, and they ate and drank.

The Sinai covenant pericope is an essential text in both the Jewish and Christian traditions. These verses recount the fulfillment of God’s promises to Adam and Abraham in Genesis and narrate the consummation of the kinship-covenant between Yahweh and Israel. Having escaped the wrath of Pharaoh and slavery in Egypt, Moses and the Israelites have made the “exodus” and arrived at Mount Sinai in Chapter 19. Here begins the theophany and revelations that will institute and solemnize the Mosaic covenant. God gives Moses the ten commandments and the covenant code stipulations follow. Moses reads the laws and ordinances to the people, who then swear an oath, in ancient mid-Eastern style, to obey God as children obey their fathers. Although arguments abound in regard to its date of composition and authorship, this pericope exhibits clear continuity with the surrounding chapters as well as with Exodus as a whole and the Pentateuch as a whole. The Old Testament tells a coherent story, in which these verses play an integral role. This is the story of God’s providence for humanity, recalling His intention ‘in the beginning’ to create ‘a nation of priests and holy people’ who will, at the right moment in history, share in the divine nature itself through the corporeal and spiritual bonds of a nuptial covenant, begun at creation and finalized in Christ.

## II. Historical and Cultural Background of the Mount Sinai Covenant (Ex 24:1-11)

It is well established in modern anthropological studies that many ancient civilizations had a flood narrative of some kind. There are three flood narratives from early Mesopotamian cultures alone (Alexander & Baker 2003, 315). Because of the earth's composition, water is associated with birth and creation. From the 'primordial waters' rises the mountain – like a child emerging from a womb – which becomes the land and the habitat of man. This idea is important for understanding the historical sense of any mountain theophany, among which Mount Sinai is archetypal. Similarly, the concept of the temple has a close relationship, both geometrically and figuratively, to the mountain, because it is a mass of land that bridges the space between earth and the heavens, where God/gods are often thought to dwell. Again, this idea is diffusive amid ancient cultures. Even Native-Americans held a similar belief about the relationship between the cosmos and the earth. "Cosmic symbolism is found in the very structure of the habitation. The [native] house is an *imago mundi*. The sky is conceived as a vast tent supported by a central pillar; the tent pole or the central post of the house is assimilated to the Pillars of the World and is so named. The central pole or post has an important ritual role; the sacrifices in honor of the celestial Supreme Being are performed at the foot of it" (Eliade 1957, 53). Many creation narratives involve the death of some god, man, or substance upon which or out of which the world is constructed/preserved, laying the foundation for sacrifice as a mode of communion with God/gods as well as explaining the idea of the 'offering' as a mode of thanksgiving to God/gods. "The gods sustain the world, while men, by their cultic gifts, feed and sustain the gods" (Ratzinger 2000, 25). In ancient Jewish tradition, the family, the home, the temple, the mountain, the sacrifice, and the meal have been amalgamated into a complex ritual system expressed as *the covenant*. The covenant permeates and animates the entire Jewish way of life.

As the pole of a tent, the top of a temple, or the peak of a mountain bonds together heaven and earth, so in Judaic tradition the covenant-rituals unite God's family and the human family in *imago dei*. "The Sinai covenant [is] ratified by Israel's acceptance of the covenant laws (Ex 24:3), a blood ritual (Ex 24:8), and a cultic meal in the presence of the Lord (Ex 24:11). On the model of ancient kinship or parity covenants, the ceremony both fortifies and intensifies the familial bond between Father Yahweh and his first-born son, Israel (Ex 4:22)" (Hahn & Mitch 2012, 47). By this covenant ceremony at Mount Sinai, the Israelites renewed the original covenant with creation itself (Gen 1-2) and the covenant with the "new" creation after the flood (Gen 9, Gen 15).

The covenant at Sinai sheds light on the beginnings of liturgy – in the broad cultic sense as well as in the specific Judeo/Christian sense – in human history. Commonly articulated in the language of *exitus* and *reditus*, the giving and receiving between divinity and humanity, the ritual acts of worship and the sacred place of worship function like divine connection points in the human person and in time and space (Ratzinger 2000). The word "temple," "temporal," and "template" all share the same etymological root, revealing the long-established relationship between these concepts. The common place of cultic worship, temples, essentially artificial mountains, were thought to have the power to revitalize time. For example, some Native American peoples celebrated the routine "rebirths" of the cosmos every new year.

A still clearer example is found in India. We saw that the erection of an altar is equivalent to the repetition of the cosmogony... the 360 bricks of the enclosure correspond to the 360 nights of the year... This is as much as to say that, with the building of each fire altar, not only is the world remade but the year is built too... *time is regenerated by being created anew...*

We find similar temporal symbolism as part of the cosmological symbolism of the Temple at Jerusalem. According Flavius Josephus the twelve loaves of bread on the table signified the twelve months of the year and the candelabrum with seventy branches represented the decans (the zodiacal division of the seven planets into tens). The Temple was an *imago mundi*; being at the Center of the World, at Jerusalem, it sanctified not only the entire cosmos but also cosmic life – that is, time. (Eliade 1957, 74-75).

Babylonians, Egyptians, and Hittites, all close contemporaries of ancient Israel, likewise recited their respective creation myths during a formal New Year ceremony. This ritual was not considered a mere refreshing of memory but was thought to be a “*reactualization* of the cosmogonic act” (Ibid. 77). Almost universally, worship is understood as the method for the sanctification of time. A “template” of ritual actions literally synchronizes human life and divine life.

The difference between Israel and most other religions lies not as much in the general form of liturgy so much as in the overall conception of the divine and the specific reasons and consequences behind each ritual action. For Israel, God is one, His essence is existence and existing is His essence; worship belongs to Him alone (cf. Ex 3:14; Deut 5:6-8). Thus, monotheism is a covenantal *and* philosophical necessity. The unique marriage of ritual and reason remains the Judaeo-Christian trademark. A similar example is found in the purpose for sacrifice. For Israel, sacrificial offerings are primarily a form of repentance and reparation, for example, to temper unhealthy desires like sexual-deviance or to affront false-gods like the Egyptian bull-god Apis. Contrarily, sacrifice in the other Mesopotamian faiths was usually a form of bribing the gods for supernatural or political power. The superficial differences are subtle, but the underlying premises are anthropocentric in the case of Judaism and egocentric in the case of Egypt and others.

Human sacrifice presents an even clearer difference. This cult practice did not seem to exist in the oldest levels of culture but appeared as a development of agricultural peoples, whose creation myths involved some form of deicide – gods were murdered like crops to “feed” new life (Eliade 1957, 101-103). However, in Jewish tradition food is purposefully rationed and purified precisely to avoid its deification; when food does play an important role in liturgy, it is

always as a celebration of thanksgiving with God (cf. Ex 24:11). Moreover, Israel's Genesis story is creation *ex nihilo*, out of nothing, and, therefore, God gives from his infinite abundance of life without need of a sacrifice on which to build the world. Sacrifice was for mankind's sake only, so that *human* sacrifice would have been a contradiction. Even in Genesis 22, where God commands Abraham to sacrifice Isaac, it is evident that God never intended to allow the sacrifice but only to test and strengthen the will of Abraham. Thus, the characteristic that sets apart the God of Abraham and Moses, in history as well as in the present, is that he treats his "chosen people" as sons – both providing discipline and showing mercy – and never as a means to cosmological, natural, political, or egotistical ends. Being made "in the image of God", *imago dei*, is a uniquely Judaeo-Christian belief that puts human beings at the center of the universe because they are the only thing created for its own sake (Gen 1:27; CCC § 356).

### III. Lexical and Syntactical Issues of the Mount Sinai Covenant (Ex 24:1-11)

Comparing the *New International Version* (NIV), the *New Revised Standard Version Catholic Edition* (NRSVCE), the *New American Standard Bible* (NASB), and the *King James Version* (KJV) English translations of Exodus 24, verses one to eleven, to Strong's Hebrew dictionary there is no significant discrepancies in the first two verses. However, this is the first time that the “seventy elders” are mentioned in Scripture, who will become important figures in later Judeo-Christian tradition.

In verse three, the Hebrew root word מִשְׁפָּט, or *mishpat* is translated as “laws” in the NIV, as “ordinances” in the NRSVCE and NASB, and “judgments” in the KJV (Sowing Circle). This word refers to the “Covenant Code” (Ex 21-23) as distinct from the Ten Commandments that are referred to as “the words of the Lord,” דְבָר, *dabar*. The rest of the verse shows minor alterations in word choice, but without any possible variance in meaning.

In verse four, בִּקְרֹן שָׁכֶם, *shakam boqer*, is translated “early in the morning” with the exception of the NIV which reads “early the next morning.” The possible difference in days does not take anything away from the covenant ceremony. The same verse continues: מִזְבֵּחַ בְּנֵה, *banah mizbeach tachath har*, “built an altar at the foot of the mountain,” with the exception of the KJV that reads “builded an altar under the hill.” At the end of the verse, “with twelve pillars,” מִצְבֵּה עֶשֶׂר שְׁנַיִם, *shenayim `asar matstsebah*, are “twelve stone pillars” only in the NIV (cf. Gen 31:45).

In verse five, Israelite men sacrifice פָּר, *par*, “young bulls” in the NIV and NASB, and “oxen” in the NRSVCE and KJV. These are שְׁלָמִים, *shelem*, “peace offerings” in the NASB and

the KJV, “fellowship offerings” in the NIV, and “offerings of well-being” in the NRSVCE. This kind of offering is new and distinct from עֹלֹת “burnt-offerings,” *olah*, which are the offerings made previously in the Pentateuch. Their purpose involves bringing something to conclusion or fulfillment, in this case, the resealing of a covenant relationship between Yahweh and Israel (Durham 1987, 339).

In verse six, Moses takes half of the blood from the sacrifice and מִזְבֵּחַ זָרַק, *zaraq mizbeach*, “he splashed against the altar” in the NIV, “he dashed against the altar” in the NRSVCE, and “he sprinkled on the altar” in the NASB and the KJV. Verse seven contains no significant variations from the Hebrew.

In verse eight, עַם זָרַק, *zaraq am*, is now translated “sprinkled it on the people” by all except the NRSVCE which preserves its previous translation of *zaraq* as “dashed it on the people.” בְּרִית דָּם הַנֶּה, *hinneh dam beriyth*, is “Behold the blood of the covenant” in the NASB and the KJV, “See the blood of the covenant” in the NRSVCE, and “This is the blood of the covenant” in the NIV. The rest of verse eight and verse nine are congruous across translations.

In verse ten, the pavement of סַפִּיר, *cappiyr*, is interpreted as “sapphire stone” in the NRSVCE and the KJV, as simply “sapphire” in the NASB, and as “lapis lazuli” in the NIV. Both translations refer to blue gems indigenous to ancient Mesopotamia. These blue rocks are described as עֵצֶם שָׁמַיִם טָהוֹר, *tohar shamayim etsem*, “as clear as the sky itself” in the NASB, “as bright blue as the sky” in the NIV, “like the very heaven for clearness” in the NRSVCE, and “as it were the body of heaven in his clearness” in the KJV. “Clearness,” or *tahor*, has parallel



roots in Ugaritic poetry which used the word to signify the brightness of the sapphire stone (Childs 1974, 498).

Finally, verse eleven contains the Hebrew root words **חַזַּקְתָּ יְדְּךָ אֶל־בְּנֵי אֲצִיֵּי־יִשְׂרָאֵל וְאָכַלְתָּ וְשָׁתָה אֶל־הֵימָוֹתָם**, *shalach yad `el `atsiyl ben Yisra`el chazah `elohiym `akal shathah*, translated differently in each edition. In the NIV the text reads: “But God did not raise his hand against these leaders of the Israelites; they saw God, and they ate and drank.” In the NRSVCE: “God did not lay his hand on the chief men of the people of Israel; also they beheld God, and they ate and drank.” In the NASB: “Yet He did not stretch out His hand against the nobles of the sons of Israel; and they saw God, and they ate and drank.” And in the KJV: “And upon the nobles of the children of Israel he laid not his hand: also they saw God, and did eat and drink.” The meaning of the Hebrew word for “chief men” or “nobles” is contested but can be literally translated as “corner pegs” (Cole 1973, 187) or “firmly rooted” (Childs 1974, 499) meaning that these men were integral to the political structure of Israel. In the Septuagint, the second half of verse 11 is rendered very differently: “And from the elect of Israel, not one failed to answer the roll-call; and they were seen in the presence of God...” (Durham 1987, 340).

#### IV. Rhetorical Analysis of the Mount Sinai Covenant (Ex 24:1-11)

##### A. *Genre*

The overall genres of Exodus are narrative and law. Terence Fretheim has said: “The book of Exodus is not historical narrative, at least in any modern sense of that phrase... [however], the material is profoundly historical in purpose” (Fretheim 1991, 7-8). The primary concern of Exodus is to record and transmit the words of God, words given in a historical context. Exodus 24, specifically, is at the beginning of the story of Israel’s time at Sinai (Ex 19-40) and is a high point in the narrative of Mosaic covenantal legislation, represented through a covenant ceremony involving binding vows, blood ritual, and a cultic meal (Hahn & Mitch 2012, 47).

##### B. *Structure*

- I. Continuation of Mountain Theophany
  - A. Moses, Aaron, Nadab, Abihu, and the seventy elders are commanded to worship on the mountain (v 1)
  - B. Moses is commanded to approach the Lord alone (v 2)
  - C. Moses tells the people what God had said, the people give their response of fidelity (v 3)
- II. Covenant Ceremony
  - A. Moses writes the words of the Lord, builds an altar and twelve pillars (v 4)
  - B. He sends young-men to make burnt-offerings and peace-offerings (v 5)
  - C. Moses puts half the blood in basins and half he sprinkles on the altar (v 6)
  - D. Moses reads the book of the covenant to the people, and the people give their response of fidelity and obedience (v 7)
  - E. Moses takes the other half of blood and sprinkles it on the people and says: “Behold the blood of the covenant... in accordance with all these words.” (v 8)
- III. Covenant Ratified by the Elders
  - A. Moses, Aaron, Nadab, Abihu, and the seventy elders worship on the mountain (v 9)
  - B. They see a vision of God on paved blue stone (v 10)
  - C. God does not raise his hand against the children of Israel, and they eat and drink in his presence (v 11)

T.D. Alexander has argued that verses 1-2 are a continuation of the divine speech from Exodus 20:22-23:33 (Alexander 1999, 4-7). This contradicts some forms of the Documentary Hypothesis which divide these verses from the previous chapter’s author as well as from verses 3-8 (Three Jews 2008). Verse 3 repeats what was recorded earlier in 19:25: “So Moses went

down to the people and told them” (Sailhamer 1992, 295). Verses 4-5 are only the second time that the Pentateuch mentions burnt-offerings and fellowship-offering side-by-side, and the other mention in Ex 20:24 provides another evidence to link these passages to the same narrative origin. Also, the prohibition against golden or silver idols in Ex 20:23 establishes a strong literary connection to the golden calf incident in Ex 32:1-6. The ratification of the covenant which is taking place in these verses of Ex 24 has significant parallels to the covenant violation in Ex 32 as well. Both passages involve the making of an altar (24:4 and 32:5), burnt-offerings and fellowship-offerings (24:5 and 32:6), and eating and drinking in God’s presence (24:11 and 32:6). The covenant ratification in verses 3-11 offers a skillfully constructed finale to the giving of the laws beginning in Ex 21. Nevertheless, popular scholarship has been entirely indecisive in deciding on the authorship of these passages (Alexander 1999, 8). Deut 27:1-8 also offers support for a unified authorship of Ex 24:1-11 through its instructions of covenant-renewal at Mount Ebal. These instructions include recording the covenant obligations, building a stone altar, making burnt and fellowship-offerings, and eating in the presence of the Lord. Thus, Ex 24:1-2, 3-8, and 9-11 need not be divided into different authorship, since they represent a coherent set of events in Jewish covenant ceremony.

### *C. Literary Devices*

Exodus 24:1-11 recounts a covenant solemnization ritual that is uniquely Jewish. The language of the text is purposefully nuptial. “Moses came and told the people all the words of the LORD and all the ordinances; and all the people answered with one voice, and said ‘All the words that the LORD has spoken we will do’” (24:3, NRSVCE). Thus, the people of Israel participate in a symbolic betrothal to the Lord, having heard the terms of His covenant and responding with their vowed “I do.” A familial bond with Yahweh is further established by the

mingling of blood on the altar, which represents God (Ex 24:6), and on the people (Ex 24:8), symbolizing that God and Israel have made a bond as strong, or stronger, than genetic biology. The blood also represents the curse of death which must accompany any covenant transgression. On a third level, the blood of the young bulls/oxen (24:5) is a direct affront to the idolatry of animals in the Egyptian religion (Hahn & Mitch 2012, 48). This ritual also imitates the ordination ceremony for Levitical priests (Lev 8:24, 30) and thereby suggests the consecration of Israel as “a kingdom of priests,” fulfilling the promise of Ex 19:6. The repetition of Moses’ actions and the peoples’ responses gives the pericope a small chiasmic structure emphasizing the significance of the burnt and peace offerings made by the “young-men of Israel.” The young-men were likely the first-born sons who had been consecrated on Passover night in Ex 19:22. Thus, this scene at Mount Sinai was meant to be the final culmination of God’s victory over Egypt and Israel’s freedom to worship (cf. Ex 4:22-23). God’s chosen people were renewing the covenant of Abraham, Noah, and Adam according to the instruction and promise of Ex 19-20 when they first arrived at Sinai. For this reason, some scholars consider this section the true end of Exodus with most of the following chapters belonging rather to Leviticus (Ellison 1982, 137).

### **Chiasm**

**24:1-2** – Moses and the elders are commanded to come up the Mountain

**24:3** – Moses reads the laws and the people swear on them

**24:4** – Moses erects the altar

**24:5** – *Young-men make burnt offerings and peace offerings*

**24:6** – Moses splashes blood on the altar

**24:7-8** – Moses reads the laws and the people swear on them in blood

**24:9-11** – Moses and the elders go up the Mountain to worship together in God’s presence

The sealing of the covenant with a communal meal clearly foreshadows the Last Supper where Jesus Christ's blood brings about the new and ultimate covenant (Mt 26:28; 1 Cor 11:23-25). The phrase "and they beheld God" (24:11; NRSVCE) is a metaphor for an interior or prophetic vision, because man cannot see God directly in this life (Ex 33:20-23; Jn 1:18; 1 Jn 4:12), but also provides a literal foreshadowing of Eucharistic adoration. Jon Courson refers to this as a "Christophony," or an Old Testament vision of the Incarnate Christ (Courson, 51:47; cf. Heb 1:3). "Under his feet there was something like a pavement of sapphire stone, like the very heaven for clearness" (24:10, NRSVCE) is a simile describing the images of the interior vision and symbolizing God's position "standing" over all creation and "walking" in the heavens (Ellison 1982, 137; Cassuto 1967, 314; cf. Ezek 1:26).

## V. Canonical Context of the Mount Sinai Covenant (Ex 24:1-11)

### A. *Immediate Context & the Section of the Book*

A few chapters before this passage, in Exodus 20-23, God gives the Ten Commandments and “Covenant Code.” The commandments establish the basic moral principles of law and the codes provide various practical applications for the Israelite people.<sup>1</sup> The arrival at Sinai (Ex 19), the giving of the law (Ex 20-23), and the covenant ceremony (Ex 24) make up a continuous and coherent stream of events, theophany, recitation of law, and sealing of the covenant (Alexander 1999, 7). In 24:3, Moses directly fulfills the command of 20:22, and likewise, in 24:4-5, he obeys the commands of 20:24-26. The “words” and “ordinances” which Moses recites to the people (24:3) are the Ten Commandments and covenant code respectively (Ex 20-23). Having rescued the Israelites from slavery to idols and wooed them with His “promised land,” the covenant betrothal ceremony of 24:1-11 presents an appropriate finale to the Exodus events thus far. The following chapters 25-31 give an extensive description of the tabernacle structure that is to be the sanctuary of God’s presence. These verses can be viewed as a sensual encounter with the God, whom the people now share “one-blood” after their covenant ceremony (Cole 1973, 186). The careful reflection on the parts of the tabernacle is like the delicate intercourse of lovers. For the Jewish people, meditation on the tabernacle mediated and prefigured the presence of God to them (Sailhamer 1992, 298).

### B. *Context of the Old Testament*

In ancient Greek, “Exodus” means “the way/road out.” This book recalls how God led the descendants of Jacob out of Egypt to a ‘promised land’ (Ex 12:25). Originally, God’s intention was simply that Israel return to the right form of worship and possibly convert the

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<sup>1</sup> Some of these applications are considered concessions, or “necessary-evils,” that are *allowed rather than commanded* for the sake of preventing greater evils due to Israel’s hardness of heart (cf. Mk 10:5; Mt 19:8)

Egyptian people from within, but Moses' transgression (murdering an Egyptian in Ex 2:12) caused a change of course. The Lord tells Moses: "Then you shall say to Pharaoh, 'Thus says the Lord: Israel is my firstborn son. I said to you, 'Let my son go that he may worship me'" (NRSVCE, Ex 4:22-23a). The word translated "worship," the Hebrew root *`abad*, is the same word translated "keep" in Gen 2:15: "The Lord God took the man and put him in the garden of Eden to till it and keep it." Thus, Exodus takes up the themes of creation. Similarly, Abraham's covenant with God, by the offering of his first-born son (Gen 22), is recapitulated at Sinai by the consecration of the first-born sons of Israel as priests (Ex 24:5). The goal of the Exodus from Egypt was, as God later says, to make of the Israelites "a holy nation and kingdom of priests" (19:6), thus satisfying the purpose of the original creation of Adam, as well as the promises to Abraham (Cole 1973, 12-13; Alexander & Baker 2003, 149). The theophany on Sinai and the covenant ceremony of Ex 24 were in their own time the fulfillment of this aim. The ceremony of Sinai combines elements of all the previous covenants, especially with Adam and Abraham, and adds to them the symbols of the Passover (cf. Ex 12), which became the central celebration of the Jewish faith as both the salvation and judgment of the first-born sons (Durham 1987, 56). The Exodus covenant, culminating in Chapter 24, connects the whole narrative of Genesis to the future events of Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy (Childs 1974, 503). Likewise, the Pentateuch as a whole sets the stage for King David and the prophets of Christ.

### ***C. Context of the Whole Canon***

Moses is one of the most prominent Old Testament figures in the New Testament. In it his name is mentioned 30 more times than David's, his covenant successor and the messianic archetype. Luke 24:27 and 44 cite Moses as the author of the pentateuchal material, and other verses added-on to Mosaic tradition (Heb 11:23-28; Acts 7:22; 1 Cor 10:4; Alexander & Baker

2003, 578). The entire Gospel of Matthew presents Jesus as a “new Moses” (Hahn 2012). Numerous parallels can be made with Exodus: Jesus holds the ultimate position of “first-born son,” the slaughter of innocents, the Holy Family’s exile in Egypt, Old Testament Joseph and New Testament Joseph, 40 days fasting in the desert, the Sinai legislation and the Sermon on the Mount, the Transfiguration, and the Last Supper, among others. The Ten Commandments in Exodus are the principle guidelines of holiness throughout Scripture and are still integral to Christian life. The tabernacle complex, which was to the Jews a portable Sinai, “is the basis of the New Testament teaching that the individual believer is the temple of the Holy Spirit (1 Cor 6:19) and that the blood of Christ is the means whereby the believer’s heart is made approachable to the holy God (Heb 9:25-26; Sailhamer 1992, 298). The institution of the Passover feast (Ex 12) accompanied by the blood ritual (Ex 24) set the precedent for the combination of the Last Supper and the crucifixion into the Christian liturgy (cf. Acts 2:42).



## **VI. Liturgical Relationship to the Mount Sinai Covenant (Ex 24:1-11)**

The Babylonian Talmud spoke of the New Jerusalem: “In the World to Come there is no eating or drinking... but the righteous sit with crowns on their heads, feasting on the brightness of the divine presence, as it says, “And they beheld God, and did eat and drink” (Ex 24:11; Pitre 2011, 113-18). After the Exodus, the Israelites of the Old Testament awaited another Exodus, a new Passover, and a new liturgy, a living and everlasting event that would fulfill all previous traditions and continue to be celebrated even into Heaven itself. The deliverance from Egypt, from literal and spiritual slavery, was initiated and remembered by a liturgical ritual. The blood and flesh of an unblemished lamb became the sign and the meal which would become the locus of Jewish life (cf. Ex 12). As Christianity is the fulfillment of Judaism, so the Eucharistic Liturgy is the fulfillment of the Passover.

In Year B of the Sunday lectionary cycle, Exodus 24:3-8 occurs on the solemnity of *Corpus Christi*, always following Holy Trinity Sunday (Just 2012). *Corpus Christi* is Latin meaning “the Body of Christ.” Year A of the same solemnity uses Genesis 14,18-20:

And Mel-chiz'edek king of Salem brought out bread and wine; he was priest of God Most High. And he blessed him and said, ‘Blessed be Abram by God Most High, maker of heaven and earth; and blessed be God Most High, who has delivered your enemies into your hand!’ And Abram gave him a tenth of everything” (RSV; Just 2012).

Year C of this solemnity uses Deuteronomy 8,2-3 and 14-16:

“Remember the long way that the Lord your God has led you these forty years in the wilderness, in order to humble you, testing you to know what was in your heart, whether or not you would keep his commandments. He humbled you by letting you hunger, then by feeding you with manna, with which neither you nor your ancestors were acquainted,

in order to make you understand that one does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of the LORD . . . then do not exalt yourself, forgetting the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery, who led you through the great and terrible wilderness, an arid wasteland with poisonous snakes and scorpions. He made water flow for you from flint rock, and fed you in the wilderness with manna that your ancestors did not know, to humble you and to test you, and in the end to do you good” (NRSVCE; Just 2012).

The common theme of these verses is that God provided food and drink as a part of His covenant promises to both Abraham and Moses, preparing the chosen people for the food and drink that Christ would give from His own Body and Blood. The modern Catholic liturgy incorporates elements from all these typological pericopes, the bread and wine of Melchizedek, the manna and water in the desert, and the blood and meat sacrifice of the Sinai ceremony.

The Gospel readings for this solemnity are John 6:51-58 in Year A, Mark 14:12-16, 22-26 in Year B, and Luke 9:11b-17 in Year C (Just 2012). Some of these vital scriptures include: “The Jews then disputed among themselves, saying, ‘How can this man give us his flesh to eat?’ So Jesus said to them, ‘Very truly, I tell you, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life in you. Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood have eternal life, and I will raise them up on the last day; for my flesh is true food and my blood is true drink’” (NRSVCE, Jn 6:52-55), “While they were eating, he took a loaf of bread, and after blessing it he broke it, gave it to them, and said, ‘Take; this is my body.’ Then he took a cup, and after giving thanks he gave it to them, and all of them drank from it. He said to them, ‘This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many’” (NRSVCE, Mk 14:22-24), and the feeding of the five thousand with five loaves of bread and two fish in Luke 9.

The Liturgy of the Hours for the solemnity of *Corpus Christi* begins the evening before with Psalm 111, "...He gives food to those who fear him..." Psalm 147, "...he feeds you with finest wheat..." Revelation 11, "...They defeated [Satan] by the blood of the Lamb..." and 1 Corinthians 10:16-17, "...because the loaf of bread is one, we, many though we are, are one body, for all partake of the one loaf" (Liturgy of the Hours 1975, 599-602). "Lord Jesus Christ, we worship you living among us in the sacrament of your body and blood..." (Liturgy of the Hours 1975, 603). The prefiguring of divine sustenance in the Eucharist is abundant throughout. The Office of Readings for the *Corpus Christi* solemnity prays Psalm 23, "...You have prepared a banquet for me in the sight of my foes..." Psalm 42, "...My soul is thirsting for God..." and Psalm 81, "...Open wide your mouth and I will fill it..." (Liturgy of the Hours 1975, 605-608). The first reading is Exodus 24:1-11. The responsory comes from John 6,48-52: "I am the bread of life. Your forefathers ate manna in the desert, and they died. This is the bread that comes down from heaven; anyone who eats this bread will never die. I am the living bread come down from heaven. Anyone who eats this bread will live forever" (Liturgy of the Hours 1975, 609-610). The second reading is from a work by Saint Thomas Aquinas:

...[Jesus] shed his blood for our ransom and purification, so that we might be redeemed from our wretched state of bondage and cleansed from all sin. But to ensure that the memory of so great a gift would abide with us for ever, he left his body as food and his blood as drink for the faithful to consume in the form of bread and wine (Liturgy of the Hours 1975, 610).

The Morning Prayer reading is Malachi 1:11: "For from the rising of the sun even to its setting, My name *will be* great among the nations, and in every place incense is going to be offered to My name, and a grain offering *that is* pure; 'for My name *will be* great among the nations,' says

the Lord of hosts” (NASB). Early Church fathers were particularly fond of this verse for describing the ubiquity of the Eucharist, its rapid spread from the eastern to the western horizons of Rome and eventually throughout the world (Aquilina 2001, 24).

Other important verses connected to this solemnity in the Hours are Wisdom 16:20, “You nourished your people with food of angels...,” Acts 2:42, “The brethren devoted themselves to the apostles’ instruction and the communal life, to the breaking of bread and the prayers...,” and 1 Corinthians 11:23-25, which recalls the words of consecration used at every Mass from the time of Christ’s Last Supper until today. Thus, the Church regards Exodus 24:1-11 as an essential moment in the historical development of the Jewish and later Christian liturgy, containing its three parts: scripture or word, priestly sacrifice, and a communal meal.

## VII. Magisterial Teaching on the Mount Sinai Covenant (Ex 24:1-11)

The Magisterium of the Catholic Church has the richest history of Old Testament interpretation save only Judaism. Thousands upon thousands of Christians have commentated on these Scriptures since the time of Christ, and many of those commentaries have become interwoven with defined Church doctrine. The 1997 Catechism declares that the Old Testament is the true Word of God, and that the New Testament must be read in light of its contents, “for the Old Covenant has never been revoked” but fulfilled (CCC § 121-123, 129). The Catechism speaks of elements of the Old Covenant that are “integral and irreplaceable” and therefore adopted into the New, including “Exodus and Passover” (CCC § 1093). The Church affirms that the covenant of Exodus 24 is inseparable from the tradition of the Ten Commandments; “the Decalogue is never handed down without first recalling the covenant” (CCC § 2060). The Catechism also acknowledges the two complementary consequences of the covenant, atoning for sin and restoring communion, and sees these elements prefigured in the Sinai covenant ceremony of Exodus 24:1-11 (CCC § 613).

Exodus 24:1-8 is cited in Vatican II’s Dogmatic Constitution on the Church and in the Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World as the emblematic pericope of the Sinai covenant between God and Israel (Congregation for the Clergy 2007; DV 14; GS 32). John Paul II’s encyclical letter *Ecclesia De Eucharistia*, “On the Eucharist in its Relationship to the Church,” mentions Exodus 24:8 as analogical parallel to the Last Supper: “By analogy with the Covenant of Mount Sinai, sealed by sacrifice and the sprinkling of blood, the actions and words of Jesus at the Last Supper laid the foundations of the new messianic community, the People of the New Covenant” (Congregation for the Clergy 2007; EE 21). Thus, the nuptial and familial union which the Israelites consummated at Sinai in Exodus 24, but later lost through

disobedience, is gained once and for all by Jesus Christ through the sacrifice of the Cross in the sacrifice of the Mass. *Evangelium Vitae*, “The Gospel of Life,” speaks of Hebrews 12:22-24, “But you have come to Mount Zion and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, and to innumerable angels in festal gathering, and to the assembly of the firstborn who are enrolled in heaven, and to God the judge of all, and to the spirits of the righteous made perfect, and to Jesus, the mediator of a new covenant, and to the sprinkled blood that speaks a better word than the blood of Abel,” as direct reference to the Mount Sinai Covenant ceremony. Exodus 24:1-11 “is fulfilled and comes true in Christ: his is the sprinkled blood which redeems, purifies and saves” (Congregation for the Clergy 2007; EV 25). Unlike the blood sprinkled at Sinai, the blood of Christ is efficacious for salvation. Also by John Paul II, *Veritatis Splendor*, “The Splendor of Truth,” traces the origins of natural law from created reason, to the Ten Commandments, to the Spirit of God, each being a unique phase in the covenant of God with humanity (Congregation for the Clergy 2007; VS 12).

Paul VI likewise used Ex 24:8 as the Old Testament archetype of the Last Supper and the Eucharistic celebration in his encyclical letter *Mysterium Fidei*, “The Mystery of Faith:” “Just as Moses made the Old Testament sacred with the blood of calves, so too Christ the Lord took the New Testament, of which He is the Mediator, and made it sacred through His own blood, in instituting the mystery of the Eucharist” (Congregation for the Clergy 2007; MF 28). In *Marialis Cultus*, “The Cult of Mary,” Paul VI called the words of Mary at the Wedding of Cana, “Do whatever He tells you” (Jn 2:5), a reechoing of the words of Israel at Sinai, “All the words that the LORD has spoken we will do” (NRSVCE, Ex 24:3; Congregation for the Clergy 2007; MC 57). Earlier Church authorities, including Augustine and Thomas Aquinas also recognized the importance of this pericope for Catholic tradition (Congregation for the Clergy 2007).

## VIII. Conclusion

### *A. The Literal Sense*

The literal sense of Exodus 24:1-11 describes the historical events which occurred at Mount Sinai with Moses after the exodus. Returning from the mountaintop with the words and ordinances of the covenant, Moses presents the Israelite people with them. The people profess their fidelity to these laws through a ritual covenant ceremony, typical to the period in history but unique in its relationship to Yahweh, the one true God. The ceremony consists of erecting a stone altar and twelve pillars, one for each tribe of Jacob, and the sprinkling of blood, from a sacrificial animal, on the altar. The altar represents God's oath in the covenant. The first-born sons, acting as priests, offer a sacrifice of young bulls, for burnt-offerings as well as meal-offerings. The Israelites swear again to obey the commands of God. Another half of the blood is then splashed on the people, and/or the twelve pillars. Verses 9-11 refer to Moses, Aaron, Nadab, Abihu, and the seventy elders' literal ascent up Mount Sinai, and the mystical vision they experience there. An actual meal is celebrated to consummate the covenantal union.

### *B. The Allegorical Sense*

The typology of Exodus 24:1-11 has been thoroughly explicated throughout Church history. The Mountain of Sinai is a type of the Tabernacle, the Temple, and the Mystical Body of Christ. It is the place where man can approach God dwelling in a *tangible* presence. The reading of the 'words of God' is an example of common covenantal ritual action and prefigures the Christian Liturgy of the Word. The oath sworn by the Israelites foreshadows the witnesses of later prophets and of the disciples of Christ, who respond with faith to the words directly from the mouth of God. The sacrifice offerings of bulls by the first-born sons sets the template for priestly sacrifices in the order of Levitical priesthood, later Davidic temple worship, and finally

the new priesthood which Jesus establishes in Peter and the twelve apostles. In the New Covenant, Christ himself will act as priest (the first-born son of God) and as sacrificial lamb (by unjust crucifixion), until his priesthood passes to the Bishops of the early Church and his sacrifice is perpetually re-presented in the Liturgy of the Eucharist. The solemnization of the covenant, by the sprinkling of blood on the altar and on the people, will reecho in John's Gospel when blood and water pour from the side of Christ and the veil of the Jerusalem Temple is torn in two. The theophany and mystical experience on Mount Sinai harken forward to the Transfiguration of Christ on Mount Tabor. The sharing of a covenant meal also embodies a type of Holy Communion which will become the source and summit of life in the New Covenant.

### *C. The Moral Sense*

The essence of the Ten Commandments retains its ethical import to this day, creating the foundation for every moral doctrine in the Christian Church. While the covenant code stipulations need not be equally adopted into modern moral thought (because of their concessionary nature and the changed context of their application), they do present an important lesson in man's need for law. Sometimes the specifics of God's commands are relative to a particular moment in time and/or a special disposition of the hearer, yet the necessity of listening to and obeying God remains absolute. The Sinai ceremony and covenant ritual illuminates for contemporary human persons the correct structure of worship that God the Father, Jesus Christ, and the Holy Spirit all affirm, in the same and in different ways. God's desires the listening heart of His people during the proclamation of his Word. He also yearns for the people's consent, as He waited for the Virgin Mary's. Moreover, the invocation of blood and the consuming of food are not additional or optional elements of Worship. God, in His infinite mercy and wise providence, combines blood and food into the single New Covenant sacrament



of Holy Communion, and combines the whole covenant ceremony into the single and eternal event of the Sacred Mass.

***D. The Anagogical Sense***

The nuptial celebration of God and his chosen people at Mount Sinai, in Exodus 24:1-11, looks forward to that ultimate wedding and feast that Saint John called the “marriage supper of the Lamb” (NRSVCE, Rev 19:9). In John’s locution of heaven, leaders and elders of the Church stand closest to God, as they did in their earthly missions (cf. 24:1, 9). As Moses mediated the covenant laws to Israel, so the Lamb of God in Heaven will open the sealed scrolls for His people. The priests established on earth will remain priests in Heaven, and the liturgical sacrifice of Christ will continue as well (cf. Rev 14:4; 19-22). The mystical vision of God walking on sapphire also returns in Revelation 4:6, where God’s throne sits before “a sea of glass” (NRSVCE). The Book of Revelation lucidly illustrates that the Mount Sinai covenant ceremony (Ex 24:1-11) contains within it a foretaste of the very life of Heaven, as it is imitated most fully in the celebration of the Catholic Liturgy: wedding *vows* are shared in the scriptural Word of God, the *sacrifice* of the faithful’s lives are offered as testimony, and the eternal *banquet* of communion consummates the covenant through a physical encounter with the Presence of God.

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