



Bible-study: 2020/02/23 (St. Matthew's Episcopal Church, McMinnville) – Exodus 24:12-18

[Ask for volunteer to read passage.]

We're going to enjoy a long series of allocations from (the Book of) *Exodus* on Sundays from late August through to the end of October, and in their proper order; but we're offered a small "piece" today and another in March, "torn" from the narrative. And, as I've said before, these weren't chosen at random by the "Lectioneers:" recently, after all, we have been hearing in the gospels from the "Sermon on the Mount," as Jesus urged His followers – all of them Jews, at that point – to abide by what sounded a lot like a new set of laws, and, similarly, this morning, we see the prologue to Moses doing something *exactly* the same on Sinai with the *original* commandments and the Hebrews, their ancestors. (To be precise, they had been declared aloud by the Lord moments earlier in chapter twenty, but *only* within Moses' hearing. As you can see, at this point in the tale – the "point" we're examining now, he hadn't yet received them on the famous pair of tablets of stone for presentation to the people as a whole.)

This "mirroring" of events – of two different "law-givers" acting as emissaries of God, speaking from an elevated vantage to an assembled audience, separated by thousands of years in history, is purposeful and thought-provoking; it is something that, surely, we're *supposed* to notice as we "grapple" with God as He has revealed himself to be in His holy Scriptures, and placing the comparable incidents side-by-side, though contrived, simply facilitates the reckoning. We might, then, in consequence, draw all kinds of conclusions about the dependability of God; that is to say, of how He has chosen to interact with humanity in consistent, repetitious fashion, so that we needn't fear Him suddenly "mixing it up," "changing the rules of the game." He is not, in other words, like Tennessean weather. Rather, 'a sure and steadfast anchor of the soul': [Heb. 6:19].

And where a good anchor is especially needed is during a storm, such as that which seems to have descended onto the peak where '[t]he glory of the Lord settled...' [Ex. 24:16] We didn't even hear the worst of it! '[T]here was', initially, 'thunder and lightning, as well as a thick cloud on the mountain, and a blast of a trumpet so loud that all the people who were in the camp [below] trembled. ... Sinai was wrapped in smoke...[and] the smoke went up like the smoke of a kiln [i. e. as a thick, tight, black column], while the whole mountain shook violently.' [19:16-18] Indeed, at first, because of these unnerving phenomena, they – the escapees from Egypt – had 'stood at a distance': [20:18b].

Moses, eventually, of course, as I know you know, approached closer to the terrifying turbulence to converse directly with his creator. And my own impression of the text is that, when he does so, God calms this tempestuous spectacle to facilitate his doing so. Yes, there remains something 'like' fire – verse seventeen, but notice that no "smoke" is mentioned on this occasion, and

I wonder if that qualification about merely the *appearance* of things is significant: God continued to shine with a *fierce* brightness – as Jesus does during the transfiguration, which we commemorate today – so, again, deliberate parallelism, but our author is careful to express that it wasn't *in fact* fire. Nor, is there mention of anymore of the frightening sounds – the trumpets or thunder.

Indeed, you might almost say that the scene on Sinai becomes peaceful; tranquil. Like stumbling into a quaint, cool, medieval chapel on a hot, Provençal day. Actually, the biblical commentator, Thomas Dozeman, claims that the author of *Exodus* is deliberately 'introducing the image of the heavenly temple as the model for an earthly sanctuary'.¹ And he justifies this by pointing to the description in the book of 'a pavement of sapphire stone' that is (miraculously?) created where the cloud containing God touches the ground: [24:10]. This splendid, opulent "pavement," which would have been extremely out-of-place in that wild, primeval landscape, many miles from cities and civilization, was, says Dozeman, 'the precious stone, lapis lazuli, used in temple construction [throughout] the ancient Near East.'²

Another scholar, Peter Enns, agrees; specifying that what we're seeing in this episode is the laying of a foundation – that's a deliberate pun, by the way – for the centering of "Yahwism" around the sacrificial cult in the sacred precinct on that other mountain, "Zion." Between the cult's apex under Solomon and this juncture, though, a gap of *many* centuries, there were a number of different, visible "stages" of "evolution." The first *obvious* one – a "solidification" of various vague elements we see already in our passage – was the construction of the "Tabernacle" – the "Tent of Meeting," which is commissioned in the *very* next paragraph: [25:1f.]. As the eventual Temple (of cut stone) that replaces it in Jerusalem, the (textile) "Tabernacle" was closely guarded, and possessed a 'tripartite structure' of areas, each permitting only certain visitors: Circumcised men into the outer courtyard, with their animals for sacrifice; only Levites to perform the various rites around the altar at the entrance to the tent; and no one but an Aaronic "high" priest into the chamber where the Ark was kept – the "holy of holies."³

And at Sinai, at the beginning of chapter twenty-four, we find God inviting Moses, 'you and Aaron, Nadab, and Abihu, and seventy of the elders of Israel,' to join Him [24:1], out of the hundreds of thousands camping at its foot, but an audience being granted ultimately to the hero alone. And, earlier, on the principal ascent, Joshua was allowed to accompany Moses too – for *some* of the upward journey. Now, we're not told *exactly* where he left these associates on those trips; these confidants, but what *is* clear is that they never come to enjoy exactly the same *intimate* proximity as their leader to God. They are left waiting at a lower altitude, but near enough to hear themselves that Moses wasn't just engaging in some elaborate deception akin to that played by the hot-air balloonist in 'The Wizard of Oz': They were close enough themselves that – I quote – 'they also they beheld God': [24:11b]. They were granted, in other words, *proof*, "proof" that they might verify to the tribes the Commandments as not a *human* fabrication, but having a genuine *divine* origin. As such, they – the

¹ *Exodus (Eerdmans Critical Commentary)* (2009), Cambridge, U. K.; Grand Rapids, M. I.: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 567.

² *Supra*.

³ *Exodus (The NIV Application Commentary: Volume 2)* (2000), Grand Rapids, M. I.: Zondervan, 391.

'leaders' – would come to exercise a crucial role when Moses' authority was tested and questioned during the wilderness wanderings.

So, if “seeing is believing” was to be important in the events that followed – for issues concerning legitimation and obedience, why didn't the Lord allow *everyone* to the meeting? Why, in the previous section, is a clear line drawn, quite literally, “in the sand”: “You shall set limits for the people all around,” God told Moses: [19:12]. And trespassers were threatened with death ‘by stoning or by being shot with arrows... This is a serious matter. [And i]t is striking that these people, whom God loves and has compassion on, are guided to this holy place to meet their God, and yet upon arrival are kept at arm's length. It is like receiving an exclusive invitation to a presidential dinner at the White House only to be kept waiting a few hours outside the gates on Pennsylvania Avenue. [But t]he fact that limits are placed around the mountain *accents* the holiness of [what, momentarily becomes] God's dwelling. You do not simply walk up to it in street clothes and chat with the occupant. The way is barred. You must *prepare* yourself first, and then you must wait until the occupant is willing to receive you.’⁴

Let me put this more simply, there is an *awfully* important dynamic being expressed here, in who waits for whom; about who is, *deservedly*, the focus of attention; about who is entitled to having the platform, the podium, the “spotlight.” Graciously, God elected Himself to be the servant of Israel when He took it upon Himself to liberate them from slavery to Pharaoh, but He *always* remained their Master; the king of kings, including, *ipso facto*, that ‘king of Egypt’ [Ex. 1:15,17,18, etc.]. Thus, He tightly controls His subjects access to His person, as any earthly ruler would. (Not for altogether the same reasons, however; not for personal security: not to protect Himself but to protect others: [20:23b-25].)

A final observation I would like to add about *Exodus* – or the middle chapters under consideration if nothing else, it that, read together, in one “sitting” – as I had to do for preparing this script, they do leave you feeling rather dizzy; off-balance. I lost track of the number of times Moses climbed up and came down again from Sinai's summit. (Both meanings of the word!) Like a crazy yo-yo. It not only sounds *exhausting*, it feels...well, confused; garbled. As if I was listening to the radio through lots of static, where audio from another station would flow in and out again.

Today's segment, for instance, begins with God inviting Moses to “Come up to me...”, but in the preceding verse he was, on the face of it, *still* “up” there with Him. (There's no description of him leaving; of him going to be elsewhere.) So, what's happened here? I'm not looking for problems, please understand; but I do want us to *truly* appreciate what is in front of us (on the page). And as Carol Meyer observes: ‘chapter 24 contains a complex set of reports...[and, frankly] the sequence of events is hard to follow’.⁵ (Have a look yourself, later: this afternoon.) Is this because *Exodus* has been assembled as a collage from a number of different sources that don't join up exactly? And by the Deuteronomist? (We met him last week. A conjectured editor – claim liberal scholars – of ancient literary-fragments, who worked either under Josiah's

⁴ *Supra*. (My emphasis.)

⁵ *Exodus* (*The New Cambridge Bible Commentary*) (2005), Cambridge, U. K.; New York, N. Y.: Cambridge University Press, 205.

direction or during the Exile for propagandistic reasons.) This theory – called, “the Documentary Hypothesis” – could make sense of some of the apparent oddities like that just mentioned:

Consider, King Harold of England is one of my home-country’s most famous monarchs: an able general and national hero; the last Anglo-Saxon to reign in the British Isles before the Franco-Normans superimposed their governance and language. He’s a veritable cultural icon, a common bedtime story, *yet* there’s no agreement as to how he died: In the first account, Harold died by being shot in the eye with an arrow in an unfortunate accident. In the other version, he was hacked to death by William the Conqueror’s invading knights at the Battle of Hastings. Which is it? He couldn’t have been killed *twice*. Some historians try to reconcile the contradiction. Ian Walker, for example, argues that Harold was hit by the arrow first, and fell to the ground *as if dead*. ‘This news would have at once sent shock waves through the English army, ...[it] wavered and broke’; at which point their enemy’s cavalry “penetrated” through their defences and dismembered the partially-blinded king, who lay vulnerable.⁶ It’s a theory! We don’t know the answer, and I often the heard *both* stories with the tension left unresolved.

Is something of that kind preserved in *Exodus*? Possibly. It’s a plausible explanation: that the sacred remembrances about these stupendous times didn’t all agree when placed side-by-side at some later date, and the community, shaped and moulded by them – the Jewish people, decided to treasure them all regardless. And, if this is the case, we shouldn’t be surprised to, occasionally, “stumble” over the “seams” where the original material has been juxtaposed, like puzzle-pieces belonging to different jigsaws. Or the presence of glaring contradictions that couldn’t be reconciled, such as why the mountain where all this drama takes place hasn’t a single name: initially in the book it was called, “Horeb.” These matters are too vast and serious to be adequately explored under the constraints we face this morning; so I’m thankful that, as I said, we will have ample opportunity later in the year. But I do want to share with you these remarks now, from Graham Davies, as to ‘...theories which envisage the existence of two or more originally separate parallel narrative sources...’:⁷

‘In the first half of the book there is[, be aware,] a series of...[“]doublets[” – wherein Moses seems to do the same thing more than once], which though not in continuous sequences of text nevertheless can be combined to form two connected and almost complete versions of the *Exodus* story. ... Most likely[,] these two parallel accounts once existed separately and were combined together...to [produce what we now see]. This has been the majority view among critical scholars since the mid nineteenth century.’⁸ If that perturbs you, don’t let it. I promise to tackle this issue in greater depth when the time comes; and, if nothing else I want to offer this thought: at an *absolute* minimum, you must, it seems to me, possess *something* of the truth in your hands, (only perhaps entwined with another tradition of more uncertain source). After all, history demands it, no?

⁶ See: *Harold: The Last Anglo-Saxon King* (2010), Stroud, Gloucestershire: The History Press.

⁷ Davies, G. I. (2020), *Exodus 1-18: A Critical and Exegetical Commentary - Volume 1: Chapters 1-10*, London: T. & T. Clark (Bloomsbury Publishing Plc.), 90.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 93-94.