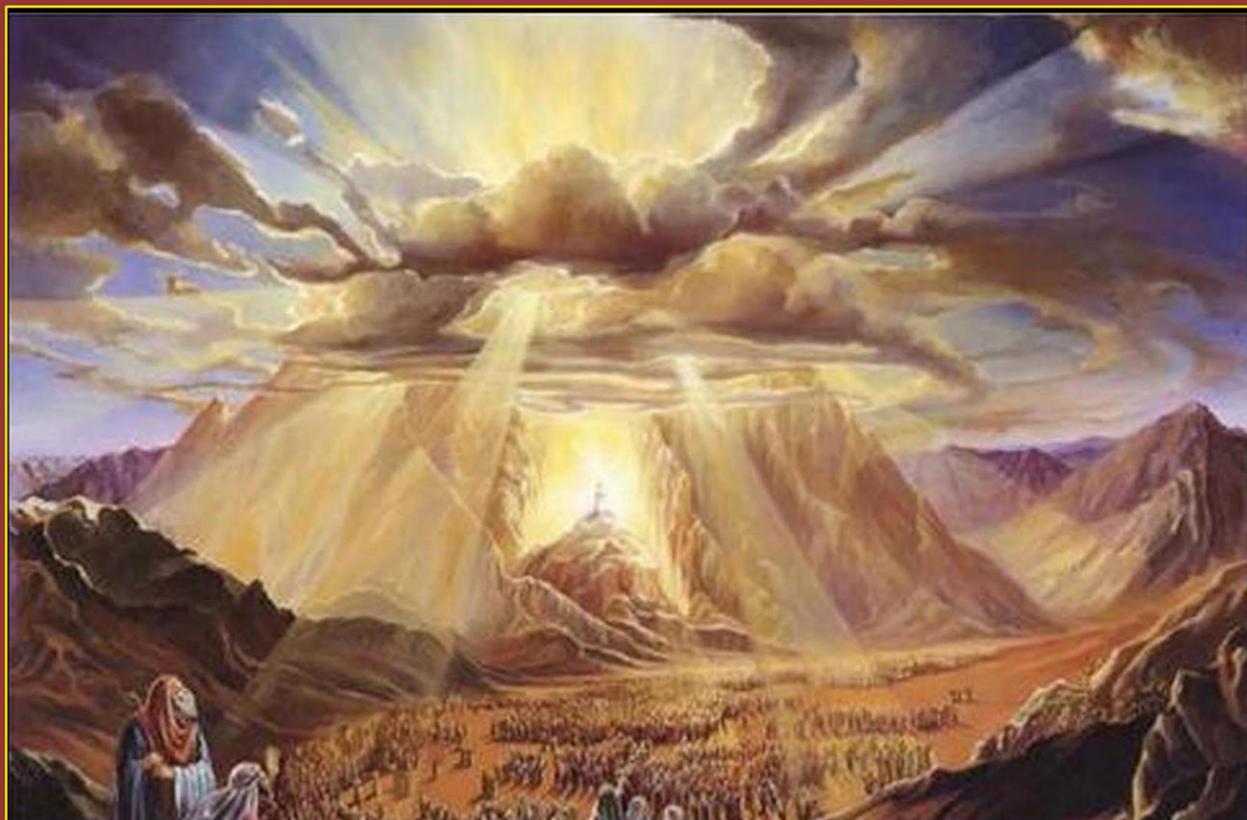


# The Three appearances of "Ten Commandments"



Doug Mason

## THE THREE APPEARANCES OF “TEN COMMANDMENTS”

The expression “Ten Commandments” appears just three times in the Bible: Exodus 34:28; Deuteronomy 4:14 and Deuteronomy 10:4. The expression does not appear in context of Exodus 20.

The listings at Exodus 34 and Deuteronomy 5 describe the Ten Commandments as being *engraved* into stone tablets. The listing at Exodus 20 however was *spoken* by God and it was written by Moses on a *scroll*. Despite these marked differences, however, the listing at Exodus 20 bears significant similarities to the listing at Deuteronomy for it to be considered under the title: “Ten Commandments”.

Although the listings at Exodus 34 and at Deuteronomy 5 were engraved into stone tablets, hence making them fixed, their texts are completely different.

An impression is given that the stone tablets included all of the commands given to Moses, and were not restricted to that specified listing. One account says that the tablets contained both “the law and commands” that Moses was given.

The LORD said to Moses, “Come up to me on the mountain and stay here, and I will give you the tablets of stone, with *the law and commands* I have written for their instruction.” (Exodus 24:12<sup>1</sup>)

There was sufficient writing to cover two sides of two stone tablets.

Moses turned and went down the mountain with the two tablets of the Testimony in his hands. *They were inscribed on both sides*, front and back. (Exodus 32:15)

This Study amalgamates the contexts of the three passages that include a “Ten Commandments”. The result shows incompatibilities between the three accounts. It is not possible to create an absolutely unified synthesis. The outcome indicates that each account was written at a different time by a different group of scribes, each having its own religious allegiances.

Following the structured analysis, views by two scholars are presented that provide gateways to rich veins which wait to be explored.

Version 1

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<sup>1</sup> All readings are from the NIV

CONTEXT AND TEXT OF EXODUS 34	CONTEXT AND TEXT OF EXODUS 20	CONTEXT AND TEXT OF DEUT. 5
	Ex 19:1 In the third month after the Israelites left Egypt — on the very day—they came to the Desert of Sinai.	Dt 4:44 This is the law Moses set before the Israelites. Dt 4:45 These are the stipulations, decrees and laws Moses gave them when they came out of Egypt.
Ex 24:1 Then he said to Moses, “Come up to the LORD, you and Aaron, Nadab and Abihu, and seventy of the elders of Israel. You are to worship at a distance, Ex 24:2 but Moses alone is to approach the LORD; the others must not come near. And the people may not come up with him.”	Ex 19:3 Then Moses went up to God, and the LORD called to him from the mountain.,	
Ex 24:3 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.”	Ex 19:8 The people all responded together, “We will do everything the LORD has said.”	
	Ex 19:9 The LORD said to Moses, “I am going to come to you in a dense cloud, so that the people will hear me speaking with you and will always put their trust in you.”	
Ex 24:9 Moses and Aaron, Nadab and Abihu, and the seventy elders of Israel went up Ex 24:10 and saw the God of Israel. Under his feet was something like a pavement made of sapphire, clear as the sky itself. Ex 24:11 But God did not raise his hand against these leaders of the Israelites; they saw God, and they ate and drank.		Dt 5:4 The LORD spoke to you face to face out of the fire on the mountain. Dt 5:5 (At that time I stood between the LORD and you to declare to you the word of the LORD, because you were afraid of the fire and did not go up the mountain.)
Ex 24:12 The LORD said to Moses, “Come up to me on the mountain and stay here, and I will give you the tablets of stone, with the law and commands I have written for their instruction.”	Ex 19:20 The LORD said to [Moses], “Go down and warn the people so they do not force their way through to see the LORD and many of them perish. Ex 19:22 Even the priests, who approach the LORD, must consecrate themselves, or the LORD will break out against them.” Ex 19:23 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.’”	

<b>CONTEXT AND TEXT OF EXODUS 34</b>	<b>CONTEXT AND TEXT OF EXODUS 20</b>	<b>CONTEXT AND TEXT OF DEUT. 5</b>
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<p><sup>Ex 24:13</sup> Then <b>Moses set out with Joshua his aide</b>, and Moses went up on the mountain of God. <sup>Ex 24:14</sup> He said to the elders, “Wait here for us <b>until we come back</b> to you. <b>Aaron and Hur are with you</b>, and anyone involved in a dispute can go to them.”</p>	<p><sup>Ex 19:24</sup> The LORD replied, “Go down and <b>bring Aaron up with you</b>. 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.”</p>
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<sup>Ex 24:18</sup> Then Moses entered the cloud as he went on up the mountain. And he stayed on the mountain forty days and forty nights.

**Instructions for the Tabernacle  
(Exodus chapters 25 - 31)**

<sup>Ex 31:12</sup> Then the LORD said to Moses, ... <sup>Ex 31:13</sup> “Say to the Israelites, **‘You must observe my Sabbaths.**”

<sup>Ex 31:18</sup> **When the LORD finished speaking to Moses on Mount Sinai, he gave him the two tablets of the Testimony, the tablets of stone inscribed by the finger of God.**

<p style="text-align: center;"><b>The Ten Commandments (20:1-17)</b></p> <p><sup>Ex 20:1</sup> And God <b>spoke</b> all these words:</p> <p><sup>Ex 20:2</sup> “I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery.</p> <p><sup>Ex 20:3</sup> “You shall have no other gods before me. <sup>Ex 20:4</sup> “You shall not make for yourself an idol in the <b>form</b> of anything in heaven above or on the earth beneath or in the waters below. <sup>Ex 20:5</sup> You shall not bow down to them or worship them; for I, the LORD your God, am a jealous God, <b>punishing the children for the sin of the fathers to the third and fourth generation</b> of those who hate me, <sup>Ex 20:6</sup> but showing love to a thousand generations of those who love me and keep my commandments.</p> <p><sup>Ex 20:7</sup> “You shall not misuse the name of the LORD your God, for the LORD will not hold anyone guiltless who misuses his name.</p>	<p style="text-align: center;"><b>The Ten Commandments (Dt 5:6-21)</b></p> <p>And he <b>said</b>:</p> <p><sup>Dt 5:6</sup> “I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery.</p> <p><sup>Dt 5:7</sup> “You shall have no other gods before me. <sup>Dt 5:8</sup> “You shall not make for yourself an idol in the <b>form</b> of anything in heaven above or on the earth beneath or in the waters below. <sup>Dt 5:9</sup> You shall not bow down to them or worship them; for I, the LORD your God, am a jealous God, <b>punishing the children for the sin of the fathers to the third and fourth generation</b> of those who hate me, <sup>Dt 5:10</sup> but showing love to a thousand generations of those who love me and keep my commandments.</p> <p><sup>Dt 5:11</sup> “You shall not misuse the name of the LORD your God, for the LORD will not hold anyone guiltless who misuses his name.</p>
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**CONTEXT AND TEXT OF EXODUS 34**

**CONTEXT AND TEXT OF EXODUS 20**

**CONTEXT AND TEXT OF DEUT. 5**

Ex 20:8 “Remember the Sabbath day by keeping it holy.” Ex 20:9 Six days you shall labor and do all your work, Ex 20:10 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 manservant or maidservant, nor your animals, nor the alien within your gates. Ex 20:11 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.

Ex 20:12 “Honor your father and your mother, so that you may live long in the land the LORD your God is giving you.

Ex 20:13 “You shall not murder.

Ex 20:14 “You shall not commit adultery.

Ex 20:15 “You shall not steal.

Ex 20:16 “You shall not give false testimony against your neighbor.

Ex 20:17 “You shall not covet your neighbor’s house. You shall not covet your neighbor’s wife, or his manservant or maidservant, his ox or donkey, or anything that belongs to your neighbor.”

Dt 5:12 “Observe the Sabbath day by keeping it holy, as the LORD your God has commanded you. Dt 5:13 Six days you shall labor and do all your work, Dt 5:14 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 manservant or maidservant, nor your ox, your donkey or any of your animals, nor the alien within your gates, so that your manservant and maidservant may rest, as you do. Dt 5:15 Remember that you were slaves in Egypt and that the LORD your God brought you out of there with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm. Therefore the LORD your God has commanded you to observe the Sabbath day.

Dt 5:16 “Honor your father and your mother, as the LORD your God has commanded you, so that you may live long and that it may go well with you in the land the LORD your God is giving you.

Dt 5:17 “You shall not murder.

Dt 5:18 “You shall not commit adultery.

Dt 5:19 “You shall not steal.

Dt 5:20 “You shall not give false testimony against your neighbor.

Dt 5:21 “You shall not covet your neighbor’s wife. You shall not set your desire on your neighbor’s house or land, his manservant or maidservant, his ox or donkey, or anything that belongs to your neighbor.”

Dt 5:22 These are the commandments the LORD proclaimed in a loud voice to your whole assembly. ... Then he wrote them on two stone tablets and gave them to me.

Dt 5:23 When you heard the voice out of the darkness, Dt 5:24 you said, “The LORD our God has shown us his glory and his majesty, and we have heard his voice from the fire. Today we have seen that a man can live even if God speaks with him. ...

CONTEXT AND TEXT OF EXODUS 34

CONTEXT AND TEXT OF EXODUS 20

CONTEXT AND TEXT OF DEUT. 5

<p><sup>Dt 5:30</sup> “Go, tell them to return to their tents. <sup>Dt 5:31</sup> But you stay here with me so that I may give you all the commands, decrees and laws you are to teach them to follow in the land I am giving them to possess.”</p>
<p><sup>Dt 6:1</sup> These are the <b>commands, decrees and laws</b> the LORD your God directed me to teach you to observe in the land that you are crossing the Jordan to possess, ...</p> <p><sup>Dt 6:6</sup> These commandments that I give you today are to be upon your hearts. ...</p> <p><sup>Dt 6:17</sup> Be sure to keep the <b>commands</b> of the LORD your God and the <b>stipulations</b> and <b>decrees</b> he has given you.</p>
<p><sup>Dt 7:1</sup> When the LORD your God brings you into the land you are entering to possess ... <sup>Dt 7:2</sup> and when the LORD your God has delivered them over to you and you have defeated them, then you must destroy them totally. Make no treaty with them, and show them no mercy. <sup>Dt 7:3</sup> Do not intermarry with them.</p>
<p><sup>Dt 7:11</sup> Therefore, take care to follow the <b>commands, decrees and laws</b> I give you today. ... <sup>Dt 7:16</sup> <b>You must destroy all the peoples</b> the LORD your God gives over to you. <b>Do not look on them with pity</b> and do not serve their gods, for that will be a snare to you. ...</p> <p><sup>Dt 7:26</sup> Do not bring a detestable thing into your house or you, like it, will be <b>set apart for destruction</b>.</p>
<p><sup>Dt 8:19</sup> If you ever forget the LORD your God and follow other gods and worship and bow down to them, I testify against you today that <b>you will surely be destroyed</b>. <sup>Dt 8:20</sup> Like the nations the LORD <b>destroyed</b> before you, so you will be <b>destroyed</b> for not obeying the LORD your God.</p>

## CONTEXT AND TEXT OF EXODUS 34

### The Golden Calf (Ex 32:1-33:6)

Ex 32:1 When the people saw that Moses was so long in coming down from the mountain, they gathered around **Aaron** and said, "Come, make us **gods** who will go before us. ...

Ex 32:3 All the people took off their earrings and brought them to **Aaron**.

Ex 32:4 He took what they handed him and made it into an idol **cast** in the shape of a calf, fashioning it with a tool. Then they said, "These are your **gods**, O Israel, who brought you up out of **Egypt**."

Ex 32:5 When **Aaron** saw this, he built an altar in front of the calf and announced, "Tomorrow there will be a festival to the LORD."

Ex 32:6 So the next day the people rose early and sacrificed burnt offerings and presented fellowship offerings. Afterward they sat down to eat and drink and got up to indulge in revelry.

Ex 32:7 Then the LORD said to Moses, "Go down, because your people, whom you brought up out of Egypt, have become corrupt.

Ex 32:9 "I have seen these people," the LORD said to Moses, "and they are a stiff-necked people.

## CONTEXT AND TEXT OF EXODUS 20

## CONTEXT AND TEXT OF DEUT. 5

### The Golden Calf (Dt 9:7-29)

Dt 9:8 At Horeb you aroused the LORD'S wrath so that he was angry enough to destroy you.

Dt 9:9 When I went up on the mountain to receive the **tablets of stone, the tablets of the covenant** that the LORD had made with you, I stayed on the mountain forty days and forty nights; I ate no bread and drank no water.

Dt 9:10 **The LORD gave me two stone tablets inscribed by the finger of God. On them were all the commandments the LORD proclaimed** to you on the mountain out of the fire, on the day of the assembly.

Dt 9:11 At the end of the forty days and forty nights, the LORD gave me the two stone tablets, the tablets of the covenant.

Dt 9:12 Then the LORD told me, "Go down from here at once, because your people whom you brought out of Egypt have become corrupt.

Dt 9:13 And the LORD said to me, "I have seen this people, and they are a stiff-necked people indeed!

CONTEXT AND TEXT OF EXODUS 34	CONTEXT AND TEXT OF EXODUS 20	CONTEXT AND TEXT OF DEUT. 5
<p>Ex 32:10 Now leave me alone so that my anger may burn against them and that I may destroy them. Then I will make you into a great nation.”</p>		<p>Dt 9:14 Let me alone, so that I may destroy them and blot out their name from under heaven. And I will make you into a nation stronger and more numerous than they.”</p>
<p>Ex 32:11 But Moses sought the favor of the LORD his God.</p>		
<p>Ex 32:14 Then the LORD relented and did not bring on his people the disaster he had threatened.</p>		
<p>Ex 32:15 Moses turned and went down the mountain with the two tablets of the Testimony in his hands. They were inscribed on both sides, front and back. Ex 32:16 The tablets were the work of God; the writing was the writing of God, engraved on the tablets.</p>		<p>Dt 9:15 So I turned and went down from the mountain while it was ablaze with fire. And the two tablets of the covenant were in my hands.</p>
<p>Ex 32:17 When Joshua heard the noise of the people shouting, he said to Moses, “There is the sound of war in the camp.”</p>		
<p>Ex 32:18 Moses replied: “It is not the sound of victory, it is not the sound of defeat; it is the sound of singing that I hear.”</p>		
<p>Ex 32:19 When Moses approached the camp and saw the calf and the dancing, his anger burned and he threw the tablets out of his hands, breaking them to pieces at the foot of the mountain.</p>		<p>Dt 9:16 When I looked, I saw that you had sinned against the LORD your God; you had made for yourselves an idol cast in the shape of a calf. You had turned aside quickly from the way that the LORD had commanded you. Dt 9:17 So I took the two tablets and threw them out of my hands, breaking them to pieces before your eyes.</p>
<p>Ex 32:20 And he took the calf they had made and burned it in the fire; then he ground it to powder, scattered it on the water and made the Israelites drink it.</p>		
<p><b>The Tent of Meeting (Ex 33:7-11)</b></p>		
<p><b>Moses and the Glory of the LORD (Ex 33:12-23)</b></p>		

<b>CONTEXT AND TEXT OF EXODUS 34</b>	<b>CONTEXT AND TEXT OF EXODUS 20</b>	<b>CONTEXT AND TEXT OF DEUT. 5</b>
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**The New Stone Tablets (Ex 34:1-28)**

Ex 34:1 The LORD said to Moses, “Chisel out two stone tablets like the first ones, and I will write on them the words that were on the first tablets, which you broke. ... Ex 34:3 No one is to come with you or be seen anywhere on the mountain; not even the flocks and herds may graze in front of the mountain.”

Ex 34:4 So Moses chiseled out two stone tablets like the first ones and went up Mount Sinai early in the morning, as the LORD had commanded him; and he carried the two stone tablets in his hands.

Ex 34:5 Then the LORD came down in the cloud and stood there with him and proclaimed his name, the LORD. Ex 34:6 And he passed in front of Moses, proclaiming, “The LORD, the LORD, the compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness, Ex 34:7 maintaining love to thousands, and forgiving wickedness, rebellion and sin. Yet he does not leave the guilty unpunished; he punishes the children and their children for the sin of the fathers to the third and fourth generation.”

Ex 34:8 Moses bowed to the ground at once and worshiped.

Ex 34:10 Then the LORD said: “I am making a covenant with you.

Ex 34:11 Obey what I command you today. I will drive out before you the Amorites, Canaanites, Hittites, Perizzites, Hivites and Jebusites. Ex 34:12 Be careful not to make a treaty with those who live in the land where you are going, or they will be a snare among you. Ex 34:13 Break down their altars, smash their sacred stones and cut down their Asherah poles.

Ex 20:18 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 Ex 20:19 and said to Moses, “Speak to us yourself and we will listen. But do not have God speak to us or we will die.”

Ex 20:20 Moses said to the people, “Do not be afraid. ...

Ex 20:21 The people remained at a distance, while Moses approached the thick darkness where God was.

**Tablets Like the First Ones (Dt 10:1-11)**

Dt 10:1 At that time the LORD said to me, “Chisel out two stone tablets like the first ones and come up to me on the mountain. Also make a wooden chest.

Dt 10:2 I will write on the tablets the words that were on the first tablets, which you broke. Then you are to put them in the chest.”

Dt 10:3 So I made the ark out of acacia wood and chiseled out two stone tablets like the first ones, and I went up on the mountain with the two tablets in my hands.

## CONTEXT AND TEXT OF EXODUS 34

## CONTEXT AND TEXT OF EXODUS 20

## CONTEXT AND TEXT OF DEUT. 5

Comment: *The text of the "Ten Commandments" is now revealed, and it is markedly different to the text at Exodus 20 and at Deuteronomy 5.*

Comment: *The texts of the Commandments at Exodus 34 and at Deuteronomy 5 are very different, even though both were engraved into stone. Both supposedly are reporting the same event.*

Ex 34:14 Do not worship any other god, for the LORD, whose name is Jealous, is a jealous God.

Ex 34:15 "Be careful not to make a treaty with those who live in the land; for when they prostitute themselves to their gods and sacrifice to them, they will invite you and you will eat their sacrifices. <sup>Ex 34:16</sup> And when you choose some of their daughters as wives for your sons and those daughters prostitute themselves to their gods, they will lead your sons to do the same.

Ex 34:17 "Do not make **cast** idols.

Ex 34:18 "Celebrate the Feast of Unleavened Bread. For seven days eat bread made without yeast, as I commanded you. Do this at the appointed time in the month of Abib, for in that month you came out of Egypt.

Ex 34:19 "The first offspring of every womb belongs to me, including all the firstborn males of your livestock, whether from herd or flock. <sup>Ex 34:20</sup> Redeem the firstborn donkey with a lamb, but if you do not redeem it, break its neck. Redeem all your firstborn sons. "No one is to appear before me empty-handed.

Ex 34:21 "Six days you shall labor, but on the seventh day you shall rest; even during the plowing season and harvest you must rest.

Ex 34:22 "Celebrate the Feast of Weeks with the firstfruits of the wheat harvest, and the Feast of Ingathering at the turn of the year.

<b>CONTEXT AND TEXT OF EXODUS 34</b>	<b>CONTEXT AND TEXT OF EXODUS 20</b>	<b>CONTEXT AND TEXT OF DEUT. 5</b>
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Ex 34:23 Three times a year all your men are to appear before the Sovereign LORD, the God of Israel.

Ex 34:24 I will drive out nations before you and enlarge your territory, and no one will covet your land when you go up three times each year to appear before the LORD your God.

Ex 34:25 “Do not offer the blood of a sacrifice to me along with anything containing yeast, and do not let any of the sacrifice from the Passover Feast remain until morning.

Ex 34:26 “Bring the best of the firstfruits of your soil to the house of the LORD your God.

“Do not cook a young goat in its mother’s milk.”

**Idols and Altars**

Ex 20:22 Then the LORD said to Moses, “Tell the Israelites this: ‘You have seen for yourselves that I have spoken to you from heaven:

Ex 20:23 Do not make any gods to be alongside me; do not make for yourselves gods of silver or gods of gold.

Ex 21:1 “These are the laws you are to set before them:

- Hebrew Servants (21:2-11)**
- 21:2-6 pp—Dt 15:12-18 21:2-11 Ref—Lev 25:39-55
- Personal Injuries (21:12-36)**
- Protection of Property (22:1-15)**
- Social Responsibility (22:16-31)**
- Laws of Justice and Mercy (23:1-9)**
- Sabbath Laws (23:10-13)**

**The Three Annual Festivals (23:14-19)**

Ex 23:14 “Three times a year you are to celebrate a festival to me. ... Ex 23:19 “Do not cook a young goat in its mother’s milk.

- Fear the LORD (Dt 10:12-22)**
- Love and Obey the LORD (Dt 11:1-32)**
- The One Place of Worship (Dt 12:1-32)**
- Worshiping Other Gods (Dt 13:1-18)**
- Clean and Unclean Food (Dt 14:1-21)**
- Do not cook a young goat in its mother’s milk.
- Tithes (Dt 14:22-29) ... (etc) ...**

<b>CONTEXT AND TEXT OF EXODUS 34</b>	<b>CONTEXT AND TEXT OF EXODUS 20</b>	<b>CONTEXT AND TEXT OF DEUT. 5</b>
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Comment: *These writer say that Moses wrote the text at Exodus 34 on two stone tablets.*

Ex 34:27 Then the LORD said to Moses, “Write down these words, for in accordance with these words I have made a covenant with you and with Israel.”

Ex 34:28 Moses was there with the LORD forty days and forty nights without eating bread or drinking water.

And he wrote on the tablets the words of the covenant—the Ten Commandments.

Comment: *These writers say that Moses wrote on a scroll everything the LORD had said. There is no mention of "stone tablets" in their discourse. Nor do they use the term "Ten Commandments"*

Ex 24:4 Moses then wrote down everything the LORD had said.

Comment: *The writers of Deuteronomy say that the LORD wrote the text on two stone tablets.*

Dt 10:4 The LORD wrote on these tablets what he had written before, the Ten Commandments he had proclaimed to you on the mountain, out of the fire, on the day of the assembly. And the LORD gave them to me.  
 Dt 10:5 Then I came back down the mountain and put the tablets in the ark I had made, as the LORD commanded me, and they are there now.

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## SUGGESTED READINGS

*Ancient Near Eastern Thought: Introducing the Conceptual World of the Hebrew Bible* pages 155-160, 292-294. John H. Walton. Apollos, an imprint of Inter-Varsity Press (2007)

*How the Bible Became a Book* pages 121-136. William M. Schneidewind, Cambridge University Press (2004)

*Scribal Culture and the Making of the Hebrew Bible* pages 143-172. Karel van der Toorn. Harvard University Press (2007)

*The Biblical Canon: Its Origin, Transmission, and Authority* pages 33-34. Lee Martin McDonald. Baker Academic (2011)

*The Canon Debate* page 135. Lee Martin McDonald, James A. Sanders (editors). Hendrickson Publishers (2004)

*The Formation of the Hebrew Bible: A New Reconstruction* page 120 and note. David M. Carr. Oxford University Press (2011)

*Who Wrote the Bible?* pages 29-30, 70-76, 113, 229, 269. Richard Elliott Friedman. HarperCollins (1989, 1997)

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*How the Bible Became a Book*, pages 119, 121-132

William M. Schneidewind, Cambridge University Press (2004)

I especially take issue with much of the last few decades of Pentateuchal scholarship, particularly in Europe, which has increasingly located the composition of the Pentateuch in the Persian period. ...

## THE FIRST REVELATION AT SINAI

Our modern perceptions of the story of the revelation and writing of the Torah tend to be conflation of a variety of texts and traditions, including the famous scene on the mountain of God from the movie *The Ten Commandments*. However, a quite different picture emerges if we focus on the first tale of God's revelation on Mount Sinai as it appears strictly in the Book of Exodus, chapter 19.

What are the words used to describe the initial revelation on Sinai? They have to do with *speaking*, not with *writing*. They have to do with *orality*, not with *textuality*. This is to be expected given the nature of early Israelite tribal society. To begin with, the people apparently hear the sounds of thunder on the mountain. A wonderful ambiguity in the Hebrew serves the story well. The Hebrew word *Qol* can mean "voice," "sound," or "thunder." As the people ascend the mountain, they hear *Qol* and see lightning flashes. We assume that *Qol* here means thunder since it is accompanied by lightning. However, in Exodus 19:16, the narrative goes on to say that "Moses would speak and God would answer him in thunder/by a voice." In turn, Moses transmits what God has spoken, orally, to the people. So, for example, the Ten Commandments are prefaced by Moses' saying that "God *spoke* all these words" (20:1). The people ask Moses to *speak* to them, to tell them what God has *said* because they are afraid of God's speaking to them directly (Exod 20:19). God instructs Moses to remind the Israelites of what they have seen for themselves — that God spoke with the people from heaven (Exod 20:22).

It is a truly astonishing observation that writing has no role in the revelation at Mount Sinai in Exodus 19. Writing has no role in the description of the giving of the Ten Commandments in Exodus 20. Writing has no role in the so-called Covenant Code in Exodus 21-23. Somehow the story of the revelation in Exodus 19-23 seems unaware that the Torah is a text. This fact will become all the more remarkable when we see how later traditions will be obsessed with telling the story of the *writing* of the Torah. The theme of God's writing of the stone tablets first appears not in Exodus 19 or Exodus 20, but after the covenant ceremony has been completed in Exodus 24. As almost an afterthought in 24:4, the narrator notes that Moses himself wrote these things down. Moses wrote them down, not because God had explicitly commanded him to do so in the narrative, but apparently because it just seemed the thing to do.

So, it is Exodus 24 that introduces writing into the Sinai event. This, however, is a very strange chapter. Exodus 24 has been a puzzle to the last century of biblical source critics and an enigma to the last millennium of pious readers. As we shall see, part of this quandary arises simply from the fact that Exodus 24 deals with such central events and ideas.

To facilitate a literary analysis of Exodus 24, I have formatted the translation that follows with paragraphing, indentation, and bracketed notes that indicate some of the basic literary units and problems within the story.

1 Then he [no subject indicated] said to Moses, "Come up to YHWH, you and Aaron, Nadab, and Abihu, and seventy of the elders of Israel, and worship at a distance. 2 Moses alone [change in who goes up the mountain] shall come near YHWH; but the others shall not come near, and the people shall not come up with him." 3 Moses came and told the people all the words of YHWH and all the ordinances; and *all the people answered with one voice, and said, "All the words that YHWH has spoken we will do."* 4 And Moses wrote down all the words of YHWH. 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. 5 He sent young men of the people of

Israel, who offered burnt offerings and sacrificed oxen as offerings of well-being to YHWH. 6 Moses took half of the blood and put it in basins, and half of the blood he dashed against the altar. 7 Then he took the scroll of the covenant [this same scroll is apparently found in 2 Kgs 23:2], and read it in the hearing of the people; and *they said*, “*All that YHWH has spoken we will do, and we will be obedient.*” 8 Moses took the blood and dashed it on the people, and said, “See the blood of the covenant that YHWH has made with you in accordance with all these words.”

9 Then Moses and Aaron, Nadab, and Abihu, and seventy of the elders of Israel [the same group mentioned in verse 1] went up, 10 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. 11 God did not lay his hand on the chief men of the people of Israel; also they beheld God, and they ate and drank.

12 YHWH said to Moses, “Come up to me on the mountain, and wait there; and I will give you the tablets of stone (also, the law [*torah*] and the commandment [*mitzvah*]), which I have written for their instruction.” 13 So Moses set out with his assistant Joshua, and Moses went up into the mountain of God ...

There has been a general agreement among scholars that this chapter is a composite of different sources and shows evidence of some reworking. There has been little agreement on how to understand the compositional development. Indeed, I would argue that the centrality of events and issues raised in Exodus 24 are just the reason for this chapter’s complexity. Here we ascend Mount Sinai, Moses writes down the Torah, the people make a covenant of blood with God, the elders actually see God, and God himself promises to write on “tablets of stone” and give them to Moses. How could any priestly redactor, any Deuteronomic editor, or indeed any modern commentator resist such a chapter? It is just this type of text that attracts editors, commentators, and interpreters. Before the notion of the text as sacred and unchangeable had developed, editors or commentators would simply insert annotations into the text itself. Some of the most simple of these types of comments may be illustrated by explanatory glosses like 1 Samuel 9:9: “Formerly in Israel, anyone who went to inquire of God would say, ‘Come, let us go to the seer’; *for the one who is now called a prophet was formerly called a seer.*” The italics mark an explanatory gloss by a later scribe who felt the need to clarify the meaning of the old Hebrew term “seer.” We also get a small glimpse into the historical layering of a text in this example: a later scribe interprets something that is thought to be obscure or difficult by adding an explanatory clause. More theologically or ideologically sensitive topics would attract even more attention as biblical texts were copied and transmitted.

The question is, how can we navigate this morass? I do not wish to debate the redaction and editing of Exodus 24 on the basis of the same old critical methodologies of source criticism, redaction criticism, or tradition history. To do so, would just be adding another voice to the many voices that were heard on Sinai. To get any further with this chapter, we need to try a new approach. My observations about Exodus 24 are guided by the development of textuality itself. My approach takes as its presupposition that the very development of the notion of the written and then of the sacred text must be central to analysis of the composition and editing in Exodus 24.

As a literary text, Exodus 24 stands apart. It begins abruptly without a subject in verse 1, leading to the conclusion that the chapter is removed or truncated from its original context. There is actually some tension with the assumption that the implied speaker of verse 1 is YHWH, who would naturally have told Moses to come up to him on the mountain. The problem with that interpretation is that the narrative is told with YHWH in the third person, thus “*he* said, ‘Come up to YHWH,’” and not “YHWH said, ‘Come up to *me*.” So who said, “Come up to YHWH”? In addition, verse 1 does not easily connect to Exodus 23. Perhaps it should be read as picking up from Exodus 20:22, where the laws of the Covenant Code (Exodus 21-23) begin. But this still would not explain the mysterious and missing subject of the first verse.

Furthermore, literary analysis would suggest that verses 2-8 represent a different source or a major shift in the narrative. This is evident from the change in the group that is supposed to go up to YHWH. In verses 1 and 9, quite a large group — including Moses, Aaron, Nadab, and Abihu, and seventy elders of Israel — are instructed to ascend the mountain. Verse 2 reverses this: Moses should ascend alone. This brings the story of Moses' ascent up the mountain in line with the earlier account in Exodus 19:3 (also v. 20) where Moses also goes up the mountain alone.

To make matters more complex, within this digression in verses 1-8 there seem to be two literary layers. These are indicated by repetition of the oath of the people in verses 3b and 7b: "All the words that YHWH has spoken we will do" (verse 7b starts, "All that..."). This type of repetition is usually an editorial marker that comments or additions have been inserted, as I pointed out with an example from 1 Kings 14:25-28 and 2 Chronicles 12:2-9 (discussed in Chapter 1). The first oath harkens back to Exodus 19:5-8, where Moses had set the "words of God" before Israel and Israel had responded, "All that YHWH has spoken we will do." In this way, verses 2-3 have now connected Exodus 24 back to the original story of the revelation in Exodus 19.

Verses 4-8 add a Deuteronomic interpretative layer to the covenant ceremony. The two parts of Exodus 24:2-8 can be divided as follows:

[Allusion to Exodus 19:5-8] 2 Moses alone shall come near YHWH; but the others shall not come near, and the people shall not come up with him." 3 Moses came and told the people all the words of YHWH and all the ordinances; and *all the people answered with one voice, and said, "All the words that YHWH has spoken we will do."*

[Deuteronomic addition] 4 And Moses wrote down all the words of YHWH. 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. 5 He sent young men of the people of Israel, who offered burnt offerings and sacrificed oxen as offerings of well-being to YHWH. 6 Moses took half of the blood and put it in basins, and half of the blood he dashed against the altar. 7 Then he took the scroll of the covenant, and read it in the hearing of the people; and they said, "*All that YHWH has spoken we will do, and we will be obedient.*" 8 Moses took the blood and dashed it on the people, and said, "See the blood of the covenant that YHWH has made with you in accordance with all these words."

The repetition of the oath ceremony in verses 2-8 certainly seems redundant. While the oath in 24:3 essentially follows the very first oath sworn by the people in Exodus 19:5-8, the oath in 24:7 is inspired by Moses writing down the revelation and then reading "the scroll of the covenant" to the people. Verse 4 notes that "Moses wrote down all the words of YHWH." What an understatement! Moses is not commanded to write down the revelation; he just does. In a simple literary reading, this verse would suggest that Moses had written down both the "Book of the Covenant" (Exod 21-23) and the Decalogue (Exod 20). Moses then makes a covenant of blood that reaches its climax in the reading of the "scroll of the covenant" and the repeated oath of the people. It is important to remember here that the people had already heard these words orally and swore to faithfully perform them (v. 3). For this reason, we recognize verses 4-8 as a secondary digression within verses 2-8, which textualizes an oral ceremony.

How should we understand these two sections within verses 2-8 in the context of the composition of the scroll? The first digression ties the story to Exodus 19. Therefore, verses 2-3 are part of the narrative thread of the Book of Exodus as a whole. Verses 2-3 are part of the process that creates one prose narrative out of the disparate stories, oral traditions and liturgies that make up the Book of Exodus. The original story of Sinai, however, is not self-conscious about its own textuality. That is, it did not narrate an account of its own writing. Instead, verses 4-8 narrate an account of Moses writing down the "scroll of the covenant." This scroll, however, was lost, according to the account in 2 Kings 22-23 about Josiah's religious reforms. The high priest Hilkiah finds a scroll that turns out to be this

same “Book of the Covenant” — note that Exodus 24:7 and 2 Kings 23 are the only places in the entire Hebrew Bible where the exact expression “the scroll of the covenant” are found.

Where else does Moses write in the Bible? After all, we usually witness Moses as one who receives the divinely written tablets, not as a writer himself. It should not be a surprise that the one other place where Moses is described as a writer is in the conclusion of the Book of Deuteronomy. As part of the commissioning of Joshua as Moses’ successor, we read, “Then Moses wrote down this law, and gave it to the priests, the sons of Levi, who carried the ark of the covenant of YHWH, and to all the elders of Israel” (Deut 31:9). This chapter is part of the editorial framework of the Book of Deuteronomy that ties it with the Book of Joshua and into a larger narrative that scholars have called the Deuteronomistic History. Even the casual reader will see, for example, that Deuteronomy 31 and Joshua 1 repeat the story of the commissioning of Joshua, thereby tying the two scrolls — Deuteronomy and Joshua — together, with the repetition serving as the literary thread. It is also important to note that the passages in Exodus 24:4 and Deuteronomy 31:9 both use the editorial device of repetition to frame the portrayal of Moses, the writer of Torah. We may surmise that it is here, in the final editing of the Bible, that Moses becomes a writer. Parenthetically, I should also point out that this editing of the Bible is probably taking place in the late Persian or Hellenistic period.

Exodus 24:4-8 incorporates an important inter-textual connection with Josiah’s religious reforms narrated in 2 Kings 22-23. The written document in Exodus 24:7 receives the title “the scroll of the covenant” (*sefer ha-brit*). This is the exact title of the book that Hilkiah, the priest of Josiah, finds in the temple. This is more than a coincidence. Indeed, the expression “scroll of the covenant” is found only here, in Exodus 24:7, and in the story of the discovery of a scroll that prompts the Josianic Reforms (2 Kgs 23:2, 21). The use of this unique expression points to an intentional literary connection between the Sinai revelation in Exodus and the scroll that is mysteriously found in the Jerusalem temple during the renovations undertaken by King Josiah: “Then the high priest Hilkiah said to the scribe Shaphan, ‘I have found a scroll of the *Torah* in the house of YHWH.’ And Hilkiah gave the scroll to Shaphan, who read it” (2 Kgs 22:8). In 2 Kgs 23:2, and 21, the narrator identifies this “scroll of the *Torah*” (*sefer ha-torah*) with the “book of the covenant” (*sefer ha-brit*). Of course, it would have been difficult to identify this scroll with the Sinai revelation if Moses had not finally written it down as we learned in Exodus 24:4. In point of fact, however, Josiah’s reforms do not closely parallel the “Covenant Code” of Exodus 21-23, but they do compare to the Book of Deuteronomy (which might be partially characterized as an interpretation of the Covenant Code).

Let us return now to the description of the narrative in Exodus 24. Verse 9 resumes the narrative thread from verse 1, which had been interrupted by verses 2-8. Note, for example, the explicit resumption of the subjects, “Moses and Aaron, Nadab, and Abihu, and seventy of the elders of Israel,” who are going up the mountain. With this restatement of the same list of subjects as in Exodus 24:1 the story returns to where it was before the long digression. The narrative then continues with the remarkable statement that upon going up the mountain, the group “saw the God of Israel.” Thereupon, God gives Moses the tablets of stone.

The introduction of the stone tablets at this point in the chapter raises some questions. Exodus 24 has two accounts of writing. The first account, in 24:4, casually notes that Moses had written down the words of God. I have already discussed this account. The second account, in 24:12, portrays God himself as writing on tablets that God gives to Moses. How do these two writings relate to one another? What were the contents of the two tablets described in the second account? These are questions that astute readers should ask as they read Exodus 24.

In its current literary form, Exodus 24 textualizes the Torah in significant ways. This textualization is most closely tied to the language of Deuteronomy and the Deuteronomistic History. First, it adds the statement, “Moses wrote down all the words of YHWH” (v. 4). Second, Moses takes the “scroll of the covenant” and reads it before all the people (vv. 7-8). Surely, it is no coincidence that the expression “scroll of the covenant” (Hebrew, *sefer ha-brit*) occurs only here in Exodus 24:7 and in the story of Josiah’s religious reforms (2 Kgs 23:2, 21). A ritual reading of the text in Exodus 24:7-8 is then the basis for the confirmation of the covenant between God and Israel, just as we also find in 2 Kings 23.

In sum, the revelation of the Covenant Code in the Book of Exodus was originally depicted as an oral revelation. There was no reading of texts. There was no writing of texts. The whole revelation reflected the orality of ancient Israel. The Book of Deuteronomy would make textuality central to the revelation. Deuteronomy would also have to address the apparent tension between this newly introduced text that Moses wrote down and the tablets of stone “written by the finger of God.” When the Exodus and Sinai traditions were incorporated into the Pentateuch and connected with the Deuteronomistic History (Deuteronomy—Kings), an account of the writing of the “book of the covenant” was introduced by the interpretative repetition in Exodus 24:4-8. When did this textualization of the Torah happen? *Since the “scroll of the covenant” is central to the Josianic religious reforms, the formation of the Pentateuch as we know it must have begun in the late seventh century B.C.E.*

## THE TABLETS OF STONE

The tablets of stone take us back to divine origins of writing. These tablets, “written by the finger of God,” are central to one of the most provocative texts of the Hebrew Bible. Moses, Aaron, and the elders of Israel go up again to Mount Sinai where they actually see the God of Israel and Moses receives the tablets of stone. The story is recounted in Exodus 24:9-18:

Then Moses and Aaron, Nadab, and Abihu, and seventy of the elders of Israel went up, 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. God did not lay his hand on the chief men of the people of Israel; they beheld God, and they ate and drank. YHWH said to Moses, “Come up to me on the mountain, and wait there; and I will give you the tablets of stone, and the law (i.e., *torah*) and the commandment, which I have written for their instruction.” So Moses set out with his assistant Joshua, and Moses went up into the mountain of God. ... Then Moses went up on the mountain, and the cloud covered the mountain. The glory of YHWH settled on Mount Sinai, and the cloud covered it for six days; on the seventh day he called to Moses out of the cloud. Now the appearance of the glory of YHWH was like a devouring fire on the top of the mountain in the sight of the people of Israel. Moses entered the cloud, and went up on the mountain. Moses was on the mountain for forty days and forty nights.

An odd collection of Israelites — Moses, Aaron, Nadab, and Abihu, and seventy of the elders of Israel — apparently hold a banquet with God on Mount Sinai. This gathering stands in contrast to the revelation in Exodus 19, where Israel was not allowed on the mountain and saw God only in the form of rumblings. The theological difficulty this physical sighting of God created was made clear by the obfuscation of the text when it was translated into Aramaic in the second century C.E. in Targum Neophiti: “they saw the Glory of the Shekinah of YHWH, and they rejoiced over their sacrifices, which were received as if they ate and drank.” In this early Jewish interpretation, the group did not actually see God, nor did they sup with him. It only seemed like they did. This attempt to explain away this text not only highlights its strangeness to later sensibilities but also suggests the antiquity of the tradition. After the strange picnic described in Exodus 24:11, Moses again goes up to the mountain where God promises Moses the tablets of stone.

What did these tablets of stone contain? One way of answering this question would be to look at the narrative that follows. Exodus 25-31 is primarily a description how to build the desert tabernacle where YHWH would dwell. Exodus 24:12, the giving of the two tablets, begins a literary unit that comes to a neat conclusion in Exodus 31:18. The closure of this literary unit is marked by an *inclusio* — that is, by a literary repetition that recalls the opening of the literary unit and intentionally brings the literary unit to a close. Thus, the narrative that begins in Exodus 24:12 is closed off by recalling this verse in Exodus 31:18:

[24:12] YHWH said to Moses, “Come up to me on the mountain, and wait there; and I will give you the tablets of stone, with the law and the commandment, which I have written for their instruction.”

... (plans for the tabernacle and the Sabbath commandment) ...

[31:18] When God finished speaking with Moses on Mount Sinai, he gave him the two tablets of the covenant, tablets of stone, written with the finger of God.

The narrative is closed by one of the most powerful and inspiring anthropomorphic images of Scripture. According to Exodus 31:18, God literally wrote the tablets with his own finger. This description is confirmed by Exodus 32:16: “The tablets were the work of God, and the writing was the writing of God, engraved upon the tablets.” But what was on these tablets? We naturally assume that the contents of Exodus 25-31 — that is, both the Sabbath commandment and the plans for building the tabernacle — would be on these tablets. Indeed, archaeological and comparative research indicate that the plan and conception of the tabernacle is quite ancient. Thus, the biblical narrative here simply frames and justifies an ancient religious artifact. According to this natural reading of the text, neither the legal code of ancient Israel nor the Decalogue was written on the famous two stone tablets; rather, God had revealed the plans for his own tabernacle and its facilities, as well as the Sabbath commandment to worship at the tabernacle.

What of the fact that the second revelation asserts that God wrote these tablets with his own finger? The best ancient analogy for such a claim would be the Mesopotamian Tablets of Destiny, discussed in Chapter 2. The Tablets of Destiny are a divine writing produced at the creation of the world. It may be that the powerful image of divine writing, the “finger of God,” used in Exodus 31:18 is appropriate precisely because it is also a metaphor for creation, as is suggested by Psalm 8:3: “I behold Your heavens, the work of Your fingers, the moon and stars that You set in place.” It might be inferred from this that divine writing had its origins in the creation of the world. After all, nothing in either Exodus 24:12 or 31:18 necessitates that God wrote the tablets while Moses waited on the mountain. One might easily assume that the tablets had been written earlier. It should be no surprise that later Jewish tradition explicitly claimed that the Torah was pre-existent. Such a claim was hardly invented *ex nihilo* by the Rabbis. Indeed, it was also suggested by the association of Torah with Wisdom, which was created by God in the beginning (e.g., Prov 8:22-30; Ben-Sira 1:1-5). Thus, the Rabbis followed a well-trodden path of interpretation.

This brings us back to the question of what was written by the finger of God? Evidently, the plans for God’s dwelling place on earth, not the legal codes or the Decalogue of early Israel. At least this is the simple reading of Exodus 24:9-31:18. After promising to give Moses the tablets, the narrative describes the various aspects of building the tabernacle and concludes with the proscription for the Sabbath service in the tabernacle. After a digression about the Golden Calf (Exod 32-34), the remainder of Exodus (chapters 35-40) is a description of the actual building of the tabernacle. The culminating event is the placing of the two stone tablets into the Ark of the Covenant and situating the ark within the tabernacle (Exod 40:20-21). At precisely this point the presence of God descends to earth and God takes his seat, enthroned above the ark on the wings of the cherubim within the tabernacle. As God promises in Exodus 25:22, “There I will meet with you, and I will speak to you — from above the cover, from between the two cherubim that are on top of the Ark of the Pact — all that I will command you concerning the people of Israel.” Actually, this would suggest that torah is received only *after the ark with the tablets is completed and placed in the tabernacle*. After the tabernacle is built, God comes to dwell in the tabernacle (as is reflected in Exod 40). From God’s dwelling place in the tabernacle, he speaks to the people of Israel. In this reading, *torah* would be literally the speaking of God from his dwelling place teaching Israel, not a written text (i.e., the *Torah*). Now, it might seem a rather curious thing to seal the tablets within the ark, especially if the tablets were intended to be read and used as a moral and legal guide. On the other hand, if the tablets contained the building plans for the tabernacle, their purpose had been served once the tabernacle was constructed. At that point they could be sealed within the ark as evidence, so to speak, that the dwelling of God on earth was built through divinely revealed and inscribed plans.

So what was revealed to Moses on the mountain? In the narrow context of Exodus 24:12-31:18, the most obvious answer is that the tablets were engraved with the divine instructions for building God's tabernacle. This early story, however, has been woven into the current narrative so that there are two accounts of writing in Exodus 24. Still, when we read Exodus 24 without the interpretation of Deuteronomy and later interpretative tradition, it is not clear what exactly Moses wrote (Exod 24:4) and what exactly God wrote (Exod 24:12). There are two discrete things that could have been written. First, God speaks the Ten Commandments (Exod 20:1-17), and then God speaks again and reveals the Covenant Code (Exod 20:22-23:33). Deuteronomy assumes that it is the Ten Commandments that are written by the finger of God, although this is never made explicit in Exodus 24. One might think that it should have been. The Deuteronomist apparently thought so.

A divine plan of the tabernacle finds parallels in Near Eastern literature and elsewhere in the Bible. The Book of Chronicles, for example, applies this notion of God's written instructions for the Solomonic temple as well. When David hands over the commission to build the Temple, he includes *inspired* written plans. David commands Solomon as follows in 1 Chronicles 28:10-12:

David gave his son Solomon the plan of the porch and its houses, its storerooms and its upper chambers and inner chambers; and of the place of the Ark-cover; and *the plan of all that he had by the spirit*: of the courts of the House of YHWH and all its surrounding chambers, and of the treasuries of the House of God and of the treasuries of the holy things ...

According to the Book of Chronicles (a Persian period text), the plan of the Temple was allegedly given to David "*by the spirit*," which undoubtedly intended to indicate the divine origin of the plans. Just as it was critical to its legitimacy for the tabernacle to have divinely inspired and *written* plans, so also was it critical for the Jerusalem Temple to have inspired and *written* plans. 1 Kings 8:4 (//2 Chr 5:5) notes that the tabernacle was brought to the Temple at the time of its dedication. This certainly suggests that the divine home was transferred from the tabernacle to the Temple. In fact, the Holy of Holies mirrors some of the features of the tabernacle — most notably the central place of the Ark of the Covenant. Later tradition saw the Temple as incorporating the tabernacle. This is reflected particularly in the Psalms (e.g., 26:8; 27:4; 61:4).

The tabernacle and the later Jerusalem Temple lacked the authority of antiquity as compared to contemporary temples in the ancient world. They could not claim the veneration accorded the god Marduk's temple in Babylon, which could trace its origins to the creation of the world. Still, the Mosaic tabernacle could claim authority and antiquity in other ways. Although the tabernacle was not "lowered from heaven" at the creation of the world (as the Babylonian temple had been in the *Enuma Elish*), the central ritual of the tabernacle service — namely, the Sabbath — had also been ordained at the creation of the world. It is surely not coincidental that the Sabbath is included in the prescriptions for the building of the tabernacle (Exod 31:12-17). Thus, God concludes the description for building the tabernacle by reminding Israel: "it shall be a sign for all time between Me and the people of Israel. For in six days YHWH made heaven and earth, and on the seventh day He ceased from work and was refreshed" (v. 17). By including the Sabbath prescription in the magical tablets written by God that describe the design of God's resting place on earth, a claim is made for the antiquity of the tabernacle through its association with the Sabbath.

The centerpiece of the tabernacle plans in Exodus 25-31 was the specifications for building the Ark of the Covenant, which would afterward house the stone tablets. It is indeed of note then that one of the great mysteries of the Bible is the disappearance of the Ark of the Covenant. Along with the ark, the stone tablets disappear. Even more remarkable is the seeming lack of concern for the disappearance of the ark and the tablets. Many theories have been proposed to account for the disappearance of the ark, from the tenth-century invasion by Shishak to the destruction or capture of the ark by Nebuchadnezzar. But we grope because the Bible is seemingly unconcerned with its disappearance! The search for the lost ark is more a modern search, memorialized by Hollywood, than it was a concern of the ancient Israelites. Conveniently, it was just this disappearance of the ark that allowed later Deuteronomic writers to argue that those missing tablets had the Ten Commandments written on them.

## THE GOLDEN CALF

While Moses is getting the Ten Commandments on the mountain of God, Aaron makes a golden calf for the people. They say, "These are your gods, Israel, that brought you up from the land of Egypt." Aaron says, "A holiday to Yahweh tomorrow!" The people sacrifice and celebrate wildly. Meanwhile, God tells Moses what is happening below, and God says that he will destroy the people and start a new people descended from Moses. Moses pleads with God to be merciful, and God relents. Moses comes down from the mountain with his assistant Joshua. When he sees the calf and the condition of the people, he smashes the tablets in anger. Then the tribe of Levi gather around Moses and carry out a bloody purge among the people. Moses makes a plea to God to forgive the people's offense and not destroy them.

The story is all questions. Why did the person who wrote this story depict his people as rebellious at the very time of their liberation and their receiving the covenant? Why did he picture Aaron as leader of the heresy? Why does Aaron not suffer any punishment for it in the end? Why did the author picture a *golden calf*? Why do the people say "These are your *gods*, Israel . . ." when there is only one calf there? And why do they say "... *that brought you up from the land of Egypt*" when the calf obviously was not made until after they were out of Egypt? Why does Aaron say "A holiday to *Yahweh* tomorrow" when he is presenting the calf as a rival to Yahweh? Why is the calf treated as a god in this story, when the calf was *not* a god in the ancient Near East? Why did the writer picture Moses as smashing the tablets of the Ten Commandments? Why picture the Levites as acting in bloody zeal? Why include Joshua in the story? Why depict Joshua as dissociated from the golden calf event?

We already have enough information from our acquaintances with the world that produced the Bible to answer all of these questions. We have already seen considerable evidence that the author of J was from Judah and the author of E from Israel. We have also seen evidence that suggests that the Israelite author of E had a particular interest in matters that related to King Jeroboam and his policies. E deals with cities that Jeroboam rebuilt: Shechem, Penuel, Beth-El. E justifies the ascendancy of his home tribe, Ephraim. E disdains the Judean policy of *missim*. E gives special attention to the matter of the burial of Joseph, whose traditional gravesite was in Jeroboam's capital, Shechem. Further, E is a source which particularly emphasizes Moses as its hero, much more than J does. In this story, it is Moses' intercession with God that saves the people from destruction. E also especially develops Moses' personal role in the liberation from slavery, in a way that J does not. In E there is less material on the patriarchs than on Moses; in J there is more on the patriarchs.

Let us consider the possibility that the person who wrote E was a Levitical priest, probably from Shiloh, and therefore possibly descended from Moses. Such a person would have an interest in developing these things: the oppressive Judean economic policies, the establishment of an independent kingdom under Jeroboam, and the superior status of Moses. If this is true, that the author of E was a Shiloh Levite possibly descended from Moses, then this answers every one of the questions about the golden calf story.

Recall that the priests of Shiloh suffered the loss of their place in the priestly hierarchy under King Solomon. Their chief, Abiathar, was expelled from Jerusalem. The other chief priest, Zadok, who was regarded as a descendant of Aaron, meanwhile remained in power. Northern Levites' lands were given to the Phoenicians. The Shiloh prophet Ahijah instigated the northern tribes' secession, and he designated Jeroboam as the northern king. The Shiloh priests' hopes for the new kingdom, however, were frustrated when Jeroboam established the *golden calf* religious centers at Dan and Beth-El, and he did not appoint them as priests there. For this old family of priests, what should have been a time of liberation had been turned into a time of religious betrayal. The symbol of their exclusion in Israel was the *golden calves*. The symbol of their exclusion in Judah was *Aaron*. Someone from that family, the author of E, wrote a story that said that soon after the Israelite's liberation from slavery, they committed heresy. What was the heresy? They worshipped a *golden calf*! Who made the golden calf! *Aaron*!

The details of the story fall into place. Why does Aaron not suffer any punishment in the story? Because no matter how much antipathy the author may have felt toward Aaron's descendants, that author could not change the entire historical recollection of his people. They had a tradition that Aaron was an ancient high priest. The high priest cannot be pictured as suffering any hurt from God because *in such a case he could not have continued to serve as high priest*. Any sort of blemish on the high priest would have disqualified him from service. The author could not just make up a story that the high priest had become disqualified at this early stage.

Why does Aaron say "A holiday to *Yahweh* tomorrow" when he is presenting the calf as a rival to *Yahweh*? Because the calf is not in fact a rival god. The calf, or young bull, is only the throne platform or symbol of the deity, not a deity itself. Why is the calf *treated* as a god in this story? Presumably because the story is polemical; the writer means to cast the golden calves of the kingdom of Israel in the worst light possible. In fact, we shall see other cases in which biblical writers use the word "gods" to include the golden calves and the golden cherubs; and in those cases, too, the text is polemical.

Why do the people say "*These* are your gods, Israel ..." when there is only one calf? Why do they say "... that brought you up from the land of Egypt" when the calf was not made until they were out of Egypt? The answer seems to lie in the account of King Jeroboam in the book of 1 Kings. It states there that when Jeroboam made his two golden calves he declared to his people, "Here are your gods, Israel, that brought you up from the land of Egypt." The people's words in Exodus are identical to Jeroboam's words in 1 Kings. It would be difficult for us to trace the textual history of these two passages now, but at minimum we can say that the writer of the golden calf account in Exodus seems to have taken the words that were traditionally ascribed to Jeroboam and placed them in the mouths of the people. This made the connection between his golden calf story and the golden calves of the kingdom of Israel crystal clear to his readers.

Why did the writer of E picture the Levites as acting in bloody zeal? He was a Levite. He wrote that Aaron had acted rebelliously while the other Levites alone acted loyally. Moses tells the Levites there that they have earned blessing by their actions. The story thus denigrates the ancestry of the Jerusalem priests while praising the rest of the Levites.

What is Joshua doing in this story, and why is he singled out as being dissociated from the heresy? Because, as we know, Joshua was a northern hero. His home tribe was the same as King Jeroboam's: Ephraim. His gravesite, like Joseph's, was in Ephraim. He is credited with having led a national covenant ceremony at Shechem, the place that was later to become Jeroboam's capital. The E writer therefore was adding to the golden calf story an element of praise for a northern hero who was associated in the tradition with the capital city and the preeminent tribe. The dissociation of Joshua from the golden calf heresy also explained why Joshua later becomes Moses' successor.

Why did the writer picture Moses as smashing the tablets of the Ten Commandments? Possibly because this raised doubts about Judah's central religious shrine. The Temple in Judah housed the ark that was supposed to contain the two tablets of the Ten Commandments. According to the E story of the golden calf, Moses smashes the tablets. That means that according to the E source the ark down south in the Temple in Jerusalem either contains unauthentic tablets or no tablets at all.

The author of E, in fashioning the golden calf story, attacked both the Israelite and the Judean religious establishments. Both had excluded his group. One might ask, why, then, was this writer so favorable to Jeroboam's kingdom in other stories? Why did he favor the cities of Shechem, Peniel, and especially Beth-El? Why did he favor the tribe of Ephraim? First, because *Shiloh* was in Ephraim, and its great priest Samuel was from Ephraim. Second, presumably because the kingdom of Israel remained his only hope politically. He could look forward to a day when the illegitimate, non-Levite priests of Beth-El would be rejected, and his Levite group would be reinstated. Judah and Jerusalem offered no such hope at that time. The priests of the family of Aaron had been firmly established there since King Solomon's time. They were Levites and therefore no less legitimate than the priests of Shiloh. They were closely tied by bonds of politics and marriage to the royal family. The only realistic hope for the Shiloh priests was in the northern kingdom. The E source therefore favored that kingdom's political structure while attacking its religious establishment.

## SYMBOLS OF FAITH

The golden calf story is not the only instance in which the author of E may have been criticizing both the northern and southern religious establishments.

In the J version of the commandments that God gives to Moses on Mount Sinai, there is a prohibition against making statues (idols). The wording of the J commandment is:

You shall not make for yourself molten gods.

The J command here forbids only *molten* statues. The golden calves of Jeroboam in the north were molten. The golden cherubs of Solomon in the south were not molten. They were made of olive wood and then gold-plated. The J text thus fits the iconography of Judah. It may imply that the golden calves of northern Israel are inappropriate, even though they are not actually statues of a god; but it does not leave itself open to the countercharge that Judah's golden cherubs are inappropriate as well.

Meanwhile, the E source's formulation of this prohibition reads:

You shall not make with me gods of silver and gods of gold.

You shall not make them for yourselves.

Perhaps this command refers only to actual statues of gods, but if it casts doubt on the throne-platform icons as well then it casts doubt on both the molten golden calves and the plated golden cherubs.

...

The golden calf story reveals more about its author than probably any other story in J or E. In addition to all that it tells us about its author's background and about its author's skill in fashioning a story, it conveys how deep his anger was toward those who had displaced his group in Judah and in Israel. He could picture Aaron, ancestor of the Jerusalem priesthood, as committing heresy and dishonesty. He could picture the national symbols of Israelite religion as objects of idolatry. He could picture the nation who accepted these symbols as deserving a bloody purge. What he pictured Moses doing to the golden calf was what he himself might have liked to do to the calves of Dan and Beth-El: burn them with fire, grind them thin as dust.

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## DEUTERONOMISTIC HISTORY

The book of Deuteronomy is presented as Moses' farewell speech before his death. It is set in the plains of Moab, just across the Jordan River from the promised land. Moses and the people have arrived there after forty years of travel in the wilderness. Moses reviews the events of the forty years that he and the people have known each other. He gives them a code of laws by which to live in the new land. He appoints Joshua as his successor. Then he climbs a mountain from which he can see the land, and there he dies.

The first key breakthrough in finding out the identity of the person who produced this account was the recognition of a special relationship between Deuteronomy and the next six books of the Bible: Joshua, Judges, 1 and 2 Samuel, and 1 and 2 Kings. These six books are known as the Early Prophets.

In 1943, a German biblical scholar, Martin Noth, showed that there was a strong unity between Deuteronomy and these six books of the Early Prophets. The language of Deuteronomy and parts of these other books was too similar for coincidence. Noth showed that this was not a loose collection of writings, but rather a thoughtfully arranged work. It told a continuous story, a flowing account of the history of the people of Israel in their land. It was not by one author. It contained various sections, written by various people (such as the Court History of David, and the stories of Samuel). The finished product, nonetheless, was the work of one person.

That person was both a writer and an editor. He selected the stories and other texts that he wanted to use from sources available to him. He arranged the texts, shortening or adding to them. He inserted occasional comments of his own. And he wrote introductory sections which he set near the beginning of the work. Overall, he constructed a history that extended from Moses to the destruction of the kingdom of Judah by the Babylonians.

For this man, Deuteronomy was *the* book. He constructed the work so that the laws of Deuteronomy would stand as the foundation of the history. When he rated the kings of Israel and Judah as "good in the eyes of Yahweh" or "bad in the eyes of Yahweh" it was according to how obedient they were to Deuteronomy's laws. He characterized the entire fate of the nation as hanging upon how well they kept the commandments of Deuteronomy. The tie between Deuteronomy and the six books that follow it appeared to be so crucially integral that Noth referred to the full seven-book work as the *Deuteronomistic history*.

Noth's analysis and the term "Deuteronomistic history" came to be widely accepted among investigators. The case was strong. The first book of the Early Prophets, the book of Joshua, begins where Deuteronomy leaves off. It develops themes that are begun in Deuteronomy, and it refers to matters first mentioned in Deuteronomy. Key passages in Joshua, Judges, Samuel, and Kings use terminology that comes from Deuteronomy and refer to specific passages in Deuteronomy. ...

The Deuteronomistic history covers the period from Moses to the end of the kingdom. It pictures Moses' last days, it has stories of the conquest of the land, stories of the judges, the kings, the division of the country into Israel and Judah, the fall of Israel, and finally the fall of Judah. It is a fabulous collection of stories: battles, romances, miracles, politics. It is history, but told from a religious perspective. What, specifically, is the religious perspective? The Deuteronomistic historian presents his history consistently in terms of *covenant*. He depicts the fate of the kings and the people as dependent on how faithfully they keep their covenants with God.