

EXODUS

From Slavery to Service

References

- **Exodus (from series Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching)**
Terence E. Fretheim, Westminster / John Knox Press, 1991
- **From Slavery to Service: A Study of Exodus**,
by Diane L. Jacobson, Augsburg Fortress,
Minneapolis, 1996 ISBN 0-8066-2978-9 (out of
print)
- “The Book of Exodus. Introduction, Commentary,
and Reflections.” Walter Brueggemann. In: **The
New Interpreter's Bible, A Commentary in
Twelve Volumes, Volume I**. Abingdon Press,
Nashville, 1994. ISBN 0-687-27814-7

10. The Law and the Golden Calf

We Are Yet Sinners (Exodus 20:22—32:35; esp. 24:9-18; 32:1-35)

Exodus 20:22—32:35

Overview

Overview Exodus 20:22—32:35

- Main sections:
 - 1. **The Book of the Covenant** (Exodus 20:22—23:33)
 - 2. **The Covenant Ceremony** (Exodus 24:1-18)
 - 3. **Instructions for the Tabernacle** (Exodus 25:1—31:18)
 - 4. **The Golden Calf** (Exodus 32:1-35)

*The Book of the
Covenant*

(Exodus 20:22—23:33)

The Book of the Covenant (Exodus 20:22—23:33)

- Material in Exodus 20:22—23:33 termed “Book of the Covenant” or the “Covenant Code” based on Exodus 24:7
- Part of the larger “Mosaic covenant”
- Four covenants in the Old Testament:
 - 1. **Covenant with Noah** (Genesis 9)
 - 2. **Covenant with Abraham** (Genesis 15)
 - 3. **Covenant with Moses** (Exodus 19)
 - 4. **Covenant with Samuel** (I Samuel 7)

The Book of the Covenant (Exodus 20:22—23:33)

- Consists of a corpus of laws
 - Very old, perhaps the oldest legal material in the Old Testament

The Book of the Covenant (Exodus 20:22—23:33)

- An outline:
 - 1. Laws for worship (20:22-26)
 - 2. Ordinances (21:1—22:20)
 - Laws for those who are slaves because of debt (21:1-11) 🔊
 - Laws leading to a death penalty (21:12-17)
 - Laws concerning violent assault (21:18-27) 🔊
 - Laws concerning the behavior and value of livestock (21:28—22:4)
 - Laws concerning restitution for excessive or unfair loss of property (22:5-17) 🔊
 - Miscellaneous laws (22:18-20)

The Book of the Covenant (Exodus 20:22—23:33)

- An outline:
 - 3. Moral Commandments and Duties (22:21—23:9) 
 - 4. Sabbatical Times and Festival Calendar (23:10-19)

The Book of the Covenant (Exodus 20:22—23:33)

- Most of these laws should be considered *illustrations* on how the Ten Commandments should be applied to practical, daily reality of a primitive, patriarchal agrarian community three millennia ago
- They are not like the Ten Commandments, principles intended for all times and all social contexts

The Book of the Covenant (Exodus 20:22—23:33)

- What can we in a complex, urban, technological and post-industrial society learn from laws for a primitive, agrarian community? (Brueggemann):
 - 1. Identify the underlying assumptions and principles which are universal
 - 2. Appreciate that most law is not an effort to fix an eternal principle, but a dynamic, ongoing struggle to best adjudicate the competing claims and interests of a specific question at hand
 - Such law can and should change
 - Such law is “reformist and practical” rather than “radical and absolute,” seeking to make a troublesome social reality as humane as possible rather than simply condemn the social reality

The Book of the Covenant (Exodus 20:22—23:33)

- We are called to do more than simply proclaim moral absolutes, but to work within the flawed structures of human society and try to shape so they become more humane, more life-serving
- 3. Consider ways into which these ancient laws might translate to our complex, urban, technological society
 - Example: law against charging interest “to the poor among you” may today apply to debtor third world nations

The Book of the Covenant (Exodus 20:22—23:33)

- Some Comments on Specific Laws
 - We do not accept slavery. However, in the context of the ancient near East, Israel's laws were marked by compassion and bias towards freedom and fair treatment
 - We do not consider women “property,” and hence find the laws about rape (“seducing a virgin”) disturbing. Israel's law takes as a given the ancient patriarchal notion of women as property, and approaches rape as a violation of the father.
 - “An eye for a eye, tooth for a tooth” is not about revenge, but a sentencing guideline to limit punishments to a reasonable amount

The Covenant Ceremony

(Exodus 24:1-18)

The Covenant Ceremony (Exodus 24:1-18)

- Two themes in this text:
 - Communion in the presence of God
 - Covenant making
- Exodus 24:9-18 

The Covenant Ceremony (Exodus 24:1-18)

- Encountering God on the Mountain (24:9-11)
 - “some of the most astonishing and inexplicable verses in the Old Testament” (Henton Davies)
 - “They fixed gloating eyes upon the Divine Presence” (Rabbi Hoshoia)
 - Words are inadequate (pavement “like”...) to describe the scene
 - God’s deference to Israel here is astonishing: ordinarily one cannot see God and live (Judges 6:22-23) because God is dangerously holy (Exodus 33:22-23)

The Covenant Ceremony (Exodus 24:1-18)

- They eat and drink
 - A meal of covenantal solidarity?
 - Could have been light and celebrative, or perhaps solemn, ominous and dreadful
- As in Ezekiel 1:26-28, God is mysterious, majestic, awe-inspiring

The Covenant Ceremony (Exodus 24:1-18)

- Moses on the Mountain Alone (24:15-18)
 - The “glory of the LORD” is like a devouring fire: alive, dangerous, visible
 - Moses enters the cloud alone, leaving the zone of humanity and entering the very sphere of God, where he will stay forty days and forty nights
 - Forty: sacred number that indicates a sacred or full amount. Other “40’s”:
 - Length of the flood
 - Time the spies were in Canaan
 - Duration Jesus spent in the wilderness
 - Period Easter to Pentecost

The Covenant Ceremony (Exodus 24:1-18)

- New Testament Counterpart: The Transfiguration
 - Luke 9:28-36 📖
 - The disciples glimpse the reality of God's holiness
- “At the core of the Christian faith is an overpowering, unutterable disclosure that gives access to the awesome holiness and moves in the direction of contemplation, wonderment, and grateful awe.”
(Brueggemann)

The Covenant Ceremony (Exodus 24:1-18)

- Vision of God is transformative
 - “No one can see God and live” → “No one could see God and remain unchanged”

*Instructions for the
Tabernacle*

(Exodus 25:1—31:18)

Instructions for the Tabernacle (Exodus 25:1—31:18)

- Seven chapters, consisting of seven speeches of the LORD to Moses on Mount Sinai on how to build a suitable place for the LORD to dwell in the midst of Israel
- Tabernacle (Hebrew *miskan*) derives from *sakan*, “to dwell” or “to sojourn”
 - Suggests full presence of God, but not necessarily permanent presence
- Tabernacle = “portable temple”

Instructions for the Tabernacle (Exodus 25:1—31:18)

- **Outline:**
 - **Tabernacle Furnishings (25:1-40)**
 - **Tabernacle Curtains and Frame (26:1-37)**
 - **The Altar, Court, and Lamp (27:1-21)**
 - **Priestly Vestments (28:1-43)**
 - **Ordination of Priests (29:1-46)**
 - **The Incense Altar (30:1-10)**
 - **Other Priestly Matters (30:11—31:11):**
Atonement Money, The Basin for Washing,
Anointing Oil and Incense, The Two Skilled
Artisans
 - **The Sabbath (31:12-18)**

Instructions for the Tabernacle (Exodus 25:1—31:18)

- Text deals with the deep, abiding human hunger for the holy mystery, the holy presence of God in “ordinary times” when there is no crises
- Affirms:
 - God’s counterpart to the human hunger: a willingness to meet
 - God’s holy presence is however not “immediately” available, but must be mediated through regularized disciplines of the community

Instructions for the Tabernacle (Exodus 25:1—31:18)

- Worship
 - The hosting of the holy
 - Requires order, discipline, planning, forethought
 - An “exercise in extravagance” and “an act of hope that believes the world ‘in here,’ in the sanctuary, must be luxurious in contrast to the world ‘out there,’ which is mean, thin, and hopeless
 - a practice of the “beauty of holiness”
 - seen in the attention to the aesthetic dimensions of the tabernacle

Instructions for the Tabernacle (Exodus 25:1—31:18)

- Actual Practice of the Presence of God
 - Requires objects such as the altar and lamp
 - To “think” or “intend” the presence is not enough; bodily engagement needed
 - Such objects (“temple furniture:” altar, altar Bible, pew hymnal, memorial piano) take on transcendent power and authority
 - Danger is not to go so far as to assign them an ultimate meaning that in fact lies beyond them

Instructions for the Tabernacle (Exodus 25:1—31:18)

- “Making holy”
 - A “daring, awesome enterprise that imagines ways in which the mystery of God in all its inscrutable power may be available to us”
 - Religious communities are always in the process of “making holy:” meals, persons, buildings, times, places

Instructions for the Tabernacle (Exodus 25:1—31:18)

- The Sabbath
 - An urgent check on the *ideology of productivity*. Some manifestations:
 - “work ethic:” must work harder to achieve more to prove one’s worth
 - Leisure cult of more games, entertainment...
 - Cult of gracious living: better stereos, wines, vacations
 - Narcissistic cults of more jogged miles, more eating disorders
 - A life engaged in endless productivity cannot reflect on ultimate questions

Instructions for the Tabernacle (Exodus 25:1—31:18)

- The Sabbath
 - “a life that cannot imitate the creator in rest is in the end self-destructive. If the goal of life is ... the presence of God, then it is clear a life committed to endless productivity is empty of the promise of God and cut off from the power of holiness” (Brueggemann)
 - Is about the stoppage of work, and given in the context of the long Tabernacle text about worship, invites to think of worship as “God’s creation engaged in joyous rest”

The Golden Calf
(Exodus 32:1-35)

The Golden Calf (Exodus 32:1-35)

- **Exodus 32:1-6. The Golden Calf** 
- Moses is gone, still on the Mountain
- People cry to Aaron, “Make for us gods!”
- Aaron supervises casting of golden calf
 - Direct, crude assault against the first and second commandments (20:1-6)
- Altar built, festival proclaimed, offerings received to the “gods” ... “who brought you up out of the land of Egypt” (v.4)

The Golden Calf (Exodus 32:1-35)

- Comparison with the Tabernacle Building Story:

| <i>Tabernacle</i> | <i>Golden Calf</i> |
|---------------------------------|-------------------------|
| God's Initiative | People's Initiative |
| A willing offering requested | Aaron commands gold |
| Painstaking preparations | No planning |
| Lengthy building process | Made quickly |
| Safeguarding of divine holiness | Immediate accessibility |
| Invisible God | Visible God |
| Personal, active God | Impersonal Object |

The Golden Calf (Exodus 32:1-35)

- **Exodus 32:1-6. The Golden Calf**
 - Sin here is not merely disobedience, but disloyalty
 - Israel in a marriage relationship with the LORD (Amos 3:2); faithfulness demanded

The Golden Calf (Exodus 32:1-35)

- **Exodus 32:7-14. The Repentance of God** 📢
 - The LORD abruptly tells Moses on the Mountain of the violation of commandment by Israel, mimicking the words of the people
 - No longer “my people,” but “your people” (v. 7)
 - God’s wrath burns hot; God tells Moses “let me alone” so God may exact judgment on the “stiff-necked” people
 - God has decided to execute God’s wrath, but decision not irrevocable
 - Tone unclear; perhaps isolation desired to suffer grief (Fretheim)

The Golden Calf (Exodus 32:1-35)

- **Exodus 32:7-14. The Repentance of God**
 - Moses does not leave as requested, but speaks up for the people
 - Tells us something about the relationship between God and Moses: dialog invited, indeed welcome. Moses also recognized as having something important to say
 - Moses' argument to God:
 - Appeals to God's *reasonableness*: people only just delivered
 - Appeals to God's *reputation*: what will the Egyptians say?

The Golden Calf (Exodus 32:1-35)

- **Exodus 32:7-14. The Repentance of God**
 - Moses' argument to God:
 - Appeals to God's *reasonableness*: people only just delivered
 - Appeals to God's *reputation*: what will the Egyptians say?
 - Reminds God of God's own promise that their descendants would be multiplied and inherit the promised land
 - In a sense, extends the promise, but God had said promise would be kept through Moses' descendants

The Golden Calf (Exodus 32:1-35)

- **Exodus 32:7-14. The Repentance of God**
 - God changes God's mind
 - Moses does not “win” a debate
 - Rather, God takes seriously the relationship with Moses. If Moses thinks and wills such things, they have a significance beyond what they have in divine isolation. God honors that as an important ingredient for shaping the future

The Golden Calf (Exodus 32:1-35)

- **Exodus 32:7-14. The Repentance of God**

- Implications for Prayer:

“The God of Israel is revealed as one who is open to change. God will move from decisions made, from courses charted, in view of the ongoing interaction with those affected. God treats the relationship with the people with an integrity that is responsive to what they do and say. Hence human prayer is honored by God as a contribution to the conversation that has the capacity to change future directions for God, people, and the world.” (Fretheim, p.287)

The Golden Calf (Exodus 32:1-35)

- **Exodus 32:15-29. The Leadership of Moses** 📢
 - Moses comes down and sees for himself what has happened
 - Ironically, Moses' anger also “burns hot”
 - Moses moves quickly to end the apostasy
 - 1. Vv. 19-20: Calf reduced to powder; people forced drink the polluted water so calf ultimately suffers the ignominy of being dispersed in human waste
 - 2. Vv. 21-24: Aaron called to account; he “spins” his role in the affair to the point of lying

The Golden Calf (Exodus 32:1-35)

- **Exodus 32:15-29. The Leadership of Moses**
 - 3. Vv. 25-29: Exacts Punishment. Community invited to declare whether they are *now* for the LORD (*not* whether or not they had participated in the idolatry)
 - Only the Levites responds positively as a group
 - They are required to kill a representative number of those who did not respond
 - The relationship with God has priority over all other relationships (Luke 14:26)
 - “For this juncture in Israel’s life, when its entire future is at stake, radical sin is believed to call for radical measures; continued life for the community is believed to be possible only through the death of some” (Fretheim)

The Golden Calf (Exodus 32:1-35)

- **Exodus 32:30-35. Will God Forgive?** 
- Moses seeks God's forgiveness for the people's sin, and, assuming ultimate responsibility as leader, offers up his place among God's elect for the sake of the people
- Moses' intercession appears unsuccessful this time
 - But Moses is not yet done interceding; and God is still open to other possibilities

The Golden Calf (Exodus 32:1-35)

- Text reveals amazing picture of God:
- “... a God who enters into genuine dialogue with chosen leaders and takes their contribution to the discussion with utmost seriousness. It is a God who works at the level of possibility but it is not a God who is indecisive or vacillating, filled with uncertainties. It is a God who chooses not to act alone in such matters for the sake of the integrity of the relationships established” (Fretheim, p. 291)

The Golden Calf (Exodus 32:1-35)

- Thus:

“Moses is responsible for shaping a future other than what would have been the case had he been passive and kept silent. This text lifts up the extraordinary importance of human speaking and acting in the shaping of the future. Simply to leave the future in the hands of God is something other than what God desires.” (Fretheim, p. 292)