

## A NATION OF LAWS

Exodus 20

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The writer of Exodus tells us that ninety days to the day, after leaving Egypt, the children of Israel crossed the Red Sea to the Sinai Peninsula.

The Sinai is that area of land between the Red Sea to the south and the Mediterranean Sea to the north. It is Egyptian territory but is considered part of the Asian, not the African continent. Roughly 23,000 square miles in area, it is about half the size of the state of Ohio. It is mostly desert with a small mountain range at the southernmost tip near the Red Sea and it is in that mountain range that most scholars believe that Mt. Horeb, also called Mt. Sinai, was located.

In our story, the Israelites come into this small mountain range and make camp and it is there that the Lord, Yahweh, decides that things have to get organized. The first order of business is to establish Moses as the unquestioned and unquestionable leader of the people. The second will be to create a set of rules by which the people will be led.

Let's not let the importance of these two things slip by us, friends. They are huge.

On the one hand, God is clear that the people need a human leader that leads with confidence and courage, a leader that has credibility and authority and whose leadership is well and securely established. At the same time, God is clear that there must be restraints on leadership. Human leaders are, well, human. They make mistakes and they are often pushed this way and that by their emotions, their fears, their foibles and their idiosyncrasies. They need checks and balances. Their authority may be absolute but their power must be limited.

Those limits, those checks and balances, come by way of laws.

The Jews were not the first to realize this need for a legal code without which people are governed by the whims of powerful individuals. It is one of the clearest and most often demonstrated lessons of history that, where there is no law, the people fall prey to despots and tyrants.

And history is replete with examples of attempts by people to put reigns on their leaders via law.

In 3000 BCE, some 1,500 years before Moses the Egyptians codified their civil laws into twelve books called the Ma'at. In 2200 BCE the Sumerian king Ur-Nammu wrote down the first code of laws using a series of "if...then" statements. In 1760 BCE Hammurabi codified the Babylonian laws and sent tablets of the code throughout the country to serve as a unified set of laws for everyone. (It was in this code that the "eye for an eye" law was first established, limiting retribution.) The Talmud, a collection of teachings by the ancient Rabbis, talks of the Code of Noah – the Noahic Code – a list of seven laws that was supposedly given by God to Noah to be passed on to all who came after.

And now, in about 1280 BCE, that list is expanded to ten in the Decalogue or the Ten Commandments, the only set of ancient laws that is still considered relevant in modern culture.

But first, before the laws are given, the receiver, the leader who will interpret and enforce them must be established.

### ELECTED BY ACCLAMATION

Once camp has been set up in the Sinai, God comes to Moses and says he has a plan for getting things organized. The first thing they have to do is to establish Moses' credibility and authority so that he is the clear leader. God wants people to know that Moses is speaking for God and with God's authority as God's plenipotentiary.

So, he tells Moses, here's what we'll do: Gather everyone around the base of the mountain (Sinai/Horeb) and I'll appear there in a thick, black cloud so the people can't see me because if they see me the sight will be too much for them and they'll die.

So I'll come in this thick, dark cloud and you stand outside the cloud and I'll talk to you from inside the cloud and the people will hear my voice and they'll know for a fact that you are following my orders and doing my bidding and no one will dare argue with you or challenge you.

Moses allows how that sounds like a good idea to him and the priests get everything all set up and ready to go and they call the people together and Moses tells them to go and fast and pray and wash their clothing and their bodies and get ready to actually hear, with their ears, the voice of God on such-and-such a day at such-and-such a time.

So everyone goes home and takes a bath just like it's Saturday night and they all put on clean clothes and come at the appointed hour and stand along the ropes that have been put up at the base of the mountain and Moses goes up the mountain a little way and it isn't long before this big black cloud appears.

Everyone leans forward a little because they don't want to miss hearing God's voice.

And then, all of a sudden, BOOM! Thunder and lightning come crashing out of that cloud and the earth shakes and it's all pretty scary and the people all go running away from the mountain. Moses chases them down and says, "Wait, don't run away. God is just testing you to make sure you don't get too close. Come on back and you can hear his voice when he talks to me."

But the people are too scared, now. They tell Moses: "No, that's okay. We're good, right here. You go ahead and talk to God and then you can tell us what he says and we'll believe you. No, really, we will. Honest. You're the leader."

So Moses goes back to the mountain and hikes up to the top of it and is up there for forty days and nights, just him and Yahweh.

### **TEN LAWS AND A BOOK**

Moses spends about a month up there and in that time God gives Moses the laws that he will use to guide and lead the people. Those laws come in two forms:

The first is a set of ten general words or commandments called the Decalogue. These are inscribed on two stone tablets, written, so the story goes, by God's own hand. The second is a book or scroll containing about 600 rules of behavior for specific circumstances and covering such things as religious rituals, a healthy diet, marriage, sexuality, civil rights and responsibilities, the treatment of servants, slaves and strangers, business dealings and a host of other issues.

Most Christians aren't even aware of this second book but, if you look closely at the art which has been created depicting Moses coming down from the mountain you will find some that show him holding the two stone tablets cradled in one arm and the scroll in the other.

When Moses finally does come down from the mountain he discovers that the people have been up to some serious mischief in his absence and Aaron has been unable to control them.

Afraid and feeling abandoned by Moses, they have taken the gold that they plundered from the Egyptians on the way out of town and melted it down and formed it into a statue of a bull calf. Scholars believe that this was either an attempt to revive the worship of Apis, the Egyptian God who supposedly appeared, from time to time, in the form of a bull. Some believe that the Hebrews may have identified their one, true God with this particularly powerful member of the Egyptian pantheon. Still others think that there may have been a cult within the ancient Hebrews who depicted Yahweh in the form of a bull.

Whatever the theology may have been, the worship of Apis or any other bull god was usually carried out in fertility cults that included sexual excess, temple prostitution and orgies.

When Moses came down from the mountain and saw what they were doing it was not the statue that enraged him since there had not been, up to that time, any law forbidding the use of images in worship. Rather, it was the behavior that the people were demonstrating that made him mad enough to throw down the tablets and break them.

Some time was spent cleaning up the mess and punishing the guilty and then Moses had to go back up the mountain with hat in hand, as it were, and get a second copy of the Decalogue which God made for him.

### **THE DO'S AND THE DON'TS**

Before we get to the laws themselves, there are a couple of things we must remember by way of context.

The law is, first and foremost, a gift from God. Its intention is not to place restraints and encumbrances upon the people, forcing and compelling them to behave this way or else. It is given to free people from uncertainty and fear and the corrupting influences of human fallibility.

The purpose of the law is twofold:

First it is to bring us together as a people. It is to be a plumb line for building a just and upright nation. It is given to guide people in how they should relate to each other in ways that are fair and equitable.

And, secondly, it is to bring us all closer to God. The people are expected to follow the law not out of fear of punishment but out of gratitude for the abundance of God's love and mercy.

So, let us look, briefly, at the laws as they appear in the New Revised Standard Version of the Bible.

#### ***I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery;***

This is the introduction. It establishes who is giving the law and why it should be obeyed. I am YHWH your God. I am the one who brought you out of the land of Egypt where you were slaves. You should do as I command out of gratitude for the love and generosity I have shown to you and you should trust that these laws emanate from that same love and generosity.

#### **1. *You shall have no other gods before me.***

This first law says that God must be known and acknowledge to be the only true God and our God. We are to worship God and to make God known to others as God has been made known to us.

#### **2. *You shall not make for yourself an idol, whether in the form of anything that is in heaven above, or that is on the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth. You shall not bow down to them or worship them; for I the LORD your God am a jealous God, punishing children for the iniquity of parents, to the third and the fourth generation of those who reject me, but showing steadfast love to the thousandth generation of those who love me and keep my commandments.***

We are not to worship, glorify, or identify as holy anything except God. Not things from nature or things made by our own hands. Not even the church or the Bible are to be confused with the God to which they point. Neither kith, nor kin, nor care, nor country are to be worshiped as divine or omnipotent or ultimate in any sense.

God also explains that while we are expected to obey the commandments out of a sense of gratitude, there are also consequences for not obeying them and those consequences extend beyond our own lives. Our choices concerning these commandments will affect the lives of our children and grandchildren.

**3. *You shall not make wrongful use of the name of the LORD your God, for the LORD will not acquit anyone who misuses his name.***

We are to revere God's holy name and nature and not use or abuse our references to God for deceitful or selfish purposes.

**4. *Remember the sabbath day, and keep it holy. For six days you shall labor and do all your work. But the seventh day is a sabbath to the LORD your God; you shall not do any work—you, your son or your daughter, your male or female slave, your livestock, or the alien resident in your towns. For in six days the LORD made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that is in them, but rested the seventh day; therefore the LORD blessed the sabbath day and consecrated it.***

One day a week must be set aside so that we can rest from our work, but this rest is so we have the necessary energy to concentrate upon, ponder, and re-establish our relationship with God. It is not to be used frivolously, carelessly, selfishly or on sinful activity.

Neither are we to require others to work on this day.

Often called the "universally ignored commandment," most Christians have pointed out that the word sabbath comes from the Hebrew word, *shavat*, meaning "to rest." They hold that any day can be designated a day of *shavat* and, in honor and memory of Easter, have named Sunday as their sabbath.

The first four commandments have to do with establishing and preserving our relationship with God as individuals and as a community of faith. This new nation of Israel would be one that stood upon the foundation of faithfulness and righteousness.

The rest of the commandments will deal with establishing and preserving our relationships with each other within that community. They will establish the parameters, the boundaries, and the limits which within which any just community must function in order to remain safe and sound.

**5. *Honor your father and your mother, so that your days may be long in the land that the LORD your God is giving you.***

This is the only commandment that is explicitly positive in content. No prohibition here. Often cited as a requirement for children to do as their parents say, this commandment is actually directed at adults. We are to take care of the elderly as they are among the most vulnerable and dependent people in any culture.

The righteousness of any culture or society is measured not in the comfort of its privileged members but in the treatment of the weak and vulnerable.

**6. *You shall not murder.***

Debate has long swirled around this seemingly simple commandment. The oldest manuscripts render the translation, "You shall not kill," but most scholars agree that that is too broad. Taken in the context of the rest of the Hebrew Scriptures, killing is a thing to be undertaken reluctantly and with a sense of dread, whether killing in war, in self-defense, or for food.

This commandment forbids unjust killing, for personal or selfish reasons, for retribution and revenge. Jesus would later expand this commandment to include any mean or hateful act, such as calling someone "you fool," that contributed to the killing of relationships.

**7. *You shall not commit adultery.***

You can't have a solid and stable culture if you can't be sure that the baby is yours. That's the essence of this commandment for faithfulness within marriage. Promise keeping, fidelity, and honesty within marriage are among the most foundational and essential values without which no society can survive, much less grow and flourish.

Jesus would later expand our understanding to include adultery of the heart wherein we treat persons who are of innate sacred worth as objects to be used for our own sexual gratification.

**8. *You shall not steal.***

For a culture to thrive we must all be secure in our property. We must know that the things we own are safe from seizure by others and that taking things which do not belong to us has consequences.

**9. *You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor.***

Often interpreted as an admonition against lying in general, this is actually a prohibition against a specific kind of lie in a specific situation against specific people.

To "bear false witness" is to testify falsely in a court of law, especially against another person. The other person that is specified in this law is any other member of the community.

In many Middle Eastern cultures, lying is not, in itself, a bad thing. To lie to one's enemies or the enemies of one's country is an honorable thing. Clever and inventive liars may be considered scallywags but rarely villains. The problem comes when you lie in court, where truth is a supreme value, and you lie about one of your countrymen and kinsmen, especially with the intention to defraud or harm that person.

Perjury does not hurt only the individual lied about, it devalues the entire justice system and makes it less effective and no society or culture can long survive without a solid and credible court system.

**10. You shall not covet your neighbor's house; you shall not covet your neighbor's wife, or male or female slave, or ox, or donkey, or anything that belongs to your neighbor.**

Along I 71, north of here, someone has put a condensed and redacted version of the Ten Commandments on two billboards. In order to make them all fit in the small space allowed the sponsor has edited this commandment to read, "Thou shalt not covet."

Unfortunately, he has missed the point completely.

To covet means simply to have a strong desire for something. The commandment is not an admonition against desire. We all desire things and there's nothing wrong with that. In fact, it is a necessary part of what it means to live and learn and grow. A person without desire is dead inside. To desire strongly is to be fully human.

The problem comes when we forget that there are some things that are out of bounds.

There are some things that it is inappropriate for us to desire and those things are the things that belong to our neighbors. Stuff that belongs to someone else, some other member of the community, is off limits. We aren't allowed to desire it. We can admire it. We can wish we had one like it. But we may not desire the thing that belongs to someone else.

The commandment doesn't say "You shall not covet anything." It says, "You shall not covet...anything that *belongs to your neighbor.*"

So go ahead and desire. Just don't desire my stuff.

### **A CULTURE SOUND AND SECURE**

The Exodus story teller tells us that the Ten Commandments and, by extension, all of the Law is given to us as a gift to help us get in a correct relationship with God and each other.

Only when we are in a correct and appropriate relationship with God and each other can we expect our church, our community, our nation to function as they should.

They are not meant tie our hands but to free our hearts for worship and praise.

They are not meant to control us but to guide us.

They are signposts that direct us along the road to God's kingdom. They are the directions to his house, the map that leads us to his embrace.

And if we write them on our hearts and let them direct our behavior there will be no need to write them on billboards by the highways, on signs in our yards, or on the walls of our schools.

**AMEN**