

## Studies in Exodus No. 30

### Exodus 24:1-11

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The “Book of the Covenant” is now complete. It is, of course, not the entire covenant. There is a great deal more to be revealed. But these chapters – 20-23 – with the opening summary (the “Ten Words”), the sections of stipulations (most in case law form), and the concluding section of blessings and curses, form a summary or précis of the covenant God made with Israel. It is a summary of the covenant’s ethical demands, but only a summary. So far we have had few of the liturgical stipulations that will be given in great detail in succeeding chapters. That is, in itself, important. Worship follows redemption and new life in the Bible. It depends upon a character shaped by faith and the love of God and one’s neighbor. Now follows the covenant making ceremony, a ceremony also typical of covenant or treaty-making in the ANE world. The NIV editors entitle this chapter “The Covenant Confirmed.” Perhaps a better title would be “The Ratification of the Covenant” or, as we will see, “The Renewal or Re-ratification of the Covenant.” What is narrated is the ceremony by which the two parties enter formally into the relationship defined by the covenant. We have such ceremonies today, of course, often held in the Rose Garden of the White House or perhaps at Camp David. Remember the “Camp David Accords?” The dignitaries sign while the cameras click away. They often have a meal afterwards to celebrate the pact or treaty. In the ANE the ceremony was of a somewhat different kind, but the idea was the same. And it was that ceremony that was taken over and sanctified by the Lord for the use of his people and to help them understand their relationship to him.

In such ratification ceremonies certain features were typical. One was an oath taken by the vassal, the weaker party to the treaty, the party upon whom the great king or sovereign was imposing his will. We replace the oath in our international treaties with a signature. But in those days the vassal *swore* his loyalty to the great king. A second feature of such ceremonies of ratification was the formal reading of the treaty. Still another was a meal, a ceremonial demonstration of friendship, particularly important in a Near Eastern setting where table fellowship and hospitality have for so long been regarded as sacred things.

### Text Comment

v.1 We are given in the opening verse the *dramatis personae* for the ceremony. Nadab and Abihu were Aaron’s eldest sons. We will read of their sin and God’s condemning them to death in Numbers 3:4. It is one of those little touches of historical authenticity that abound in the Bible. You might expect those names to have been edited out of the history after their disgrace, but, even in the narrative of such an important event, we have the facts, embarrassing as they are in some ways.

Seventy is a number representing completeness. Remember there were seventy descendants of Abraham who went down to Egypt with Jacob. Seventy, therefore, is an appropriate number for a representative group, a group that stands for the entire congregation.

The Bible shows us a great deal of this and American egalitarians would do well to take notice. We sometimes object to people getting special privileges and opportunities or to having special roles, for some to represent many others, but the Lord was always giving to some what he did not give to others. Not only were there only Twelve in the Lord's inner circle of disciples, there were only three of *those* men who were privileged to belong to the innermost circle. Don't make of the rest of those men a stone. You know and I know that they struggled with temptations to jealousy because of the intimacy with the Master that Peter, James, and John enjoyed. Yet the Lord did not solve the problem by making everyone equal in privilege and opportunity. Even in heaven there are these distinctions. There are angels and archangels and, no doubt, as the Bible clearly seems to say, throughout the eternal future there will be some men above others and closer to the Lord than others. And we will agree then that it ought to be so. So, let us honor the Lord and accept it now. It is part of true godliness and the humility that lies in its foundation that we accept that others may rightly be given what we are not. We have no claim!

- v.2 The common folk remain at the foot of the mountain. Even the other representatives come only so far. Only Moses, the mediator between God and the people, goes to the top of the mountain to speak with God. We have a good bit of material in the Bible that features these degrees of access – the priests who enter the sanctuary, the Holy Place, the high priest who alone goes once a year into the Most Holy Place; the Lord Jesus who goes alone further into the Garden of Gethsemane, leaving the three at a distance and the rest somewhat further away. It is one way of illustrating the terrible holiness of God and the difficulty of overcoming that moral distance that separates men from him. That is the distance that Christ crossed in our place.
- v.3 “Words and Laws” refers to the Ten Commandments and the body of case laws, the two sections of the body of the Book of the Covenant. The Ten Commandments are, as we saw, referred to as the Ten Words in this material and the word “laws” is the same word as in 21:1 which introduces the case law section of the Book of the Covenant.

The impression is that Moses came down from the mountain to fulfill this instruction. It appears that he had been on the mountain when the Ten Words and the case laws were revealed to him (19:20). [Cassuto, 311]

- v.4 Every ANE covenant provided for a written copy and a public recital of the covenant with its terms. The copies of the covenant, remember, were deposited in the respective sanctuaries of the two parties, but in Israel's case, the tabernacle and then the temple, were the sanctuaries of both Yahweh and Israel and thus both copies of the covenant were thus deposited there, in the ark of the covenant.

The two parties are thus both represented: Israel by the twelve pillars, each representing one of the tribes, and Yahweh by the altar.

- v.5 We have here another indication that the system of sacrificial worship that will be elaborated at such great length in Leviticus already existed, at least in a simple form. The “young men” is an historical touch: this was before the organization of a clerical

priesthood. Sacrifices were then more familial than the ecclesiastical affairs that they would soon become. There was a practical consideration, of course. This was heavy work; the sort of work most suited to young men.

- v.6 There are two parties to this covenant and so the blood of the covenant is divided between them: between the Lord, who is represented by the altar, and the people. So both the altar is sprinkled with blood and, the blood in the bowls will be used to sprinkle the people, as we will read in v.8. In all likelihood, the blood was sprinkled on the 70 elders who represented the people.
- v.7 Between the two parts of the sprinkling of blood Moses read the covenant to the people, perhaps to the 70 elders representing the people. A preliminary form of this oath of obedience was taken in 19:8 and then again here in v. 3 after an oral recitation of perhaps the gist of the commandments in chapters 21-24. Here it is repeated after the people were given a more complete account of the covenant to which they are summoned to be faithful. Here is the origin for the term “Book of the Covenant” to describe the preceding four chapters.
- v.8 The phrase “the blood of the covenant”, as you remember, reappears in the institution of the Lord’s Supper.
- v.10 That *they saw* the God of Israel seems to contradict 33:20 – where God says to Moses, “you cannot see my face, for no one may see me and live” – but even Moses saw something of God’s glory, his back or its aftereffects (33:28) – and that seems to be the case here. The fact that the only thing described is the pavement under God’s feet – obviously a dramatic anthropomorphism – suggests that these men were unable to lift their eyes above the Lord’s footstool. They could see only what could be seen from a prostrate position. There are deep and vital truths couched in all of these anthropomorphic descriptions of the sight of God: the transcendent glory of God, the distance that separates creature from creator, and the humility and fear that ought to mark man’s approach to the living God. That is why, we read in the next verse, almost in a tone of surprise, that these men did not perish for having seen the glory of God.

The pavement was a deep blue, apparently, like the brilliant sky. The azure appearance of an entire pavement of sapphire or lapis lazuli that is also clear as the sky is beyond our comprehension. The point is to overwhelm our imagination, as the imagination of these men was overwhelmed. One is describing the indescribable. By the way, sapphire is the Hebrew word here. It is one of a few words in English that are from the Hebrew. It may refer to a blue sapphire, or, as many scholars think, to the stone we know as lapis lazuli.

- v.11 The food they ate was, no doubt, the food that was part of the fellowship or peace offerings mentioned in v. 5. Those sacrifices were always concluded with a meal.

According to one scholar, “This is the real end of Exodus. The remaining chapters, with one major exception, belong to Leviticus.” The one exception is, of course, the narrative of the golden calf and its aftermath in Exodus 32-34. The rest is all liturgical regulations

such as we have in Leviticus. Remember, the division of the Pentateuch into five books is artificial, having as much to do with the amount of material that could be put on a scroll as any obvious or implicit division of the material by subject or theme.

As you all know very well, we have been for some time living through a period of controversy regarding the worship of the church on the Lord's Day. The consensus of generations has crumbled over these last thirty years or so and now, so it seems, every congregation is doing what is right in its own eyes. In a way that is unprecedented in the historical experience of American and European Christianity, large numbers of people wash back and forth over the sands of evangelicalism in large part because of liturgical issues. They don't like the service here or the kind of singing there or the informality or formality in still some other church. In the past people would leave one church and try another because they were peaked about something that had happened in a church, they had been offended by someone or something, or because they liked one preacher better than another. But what is nowadays referred to as the *style of worship* was not an issue; was virtually *never* an issue. But those days, as we know, are long gone. And even though the revolution may seem to be largely complete – most of American evangelicalism having gone over to the new and very simple liturgy of singing, offering, and sermon – as a matter of fact there continues to be a great deal of unrest and time alone will tell whether the new consensus will prove to be stable. There are certainly many thoughtful churches and Christians that have not accepted it and have moved in other directions, our own congregation among them.

In regard to this modern controversy and the contemporary discussion of the worship service of Bible-believing Christian churches, Exodus 24 is an important text. We know it is about worship because we are told in v. 1 that what is described in the chapter is “worship.” To be sure, it will not help us to decide whether to sing hymns or gospel songs. It will give us no guidance as to whether we could worship on Saturday night instead of Sunday morning. It will not provide us with a complete answer to the question: what may or may not be included in a Christian liturgy? But what it does do is *lay a foundation* for all thinking about Lord's Day worship. It sets forth a principle. It tells us what a worship service *is* and, until we know *that*, we cannot answer any of the other questions intelligently. And it not only gives us a foundational principle, it sets before us the primary movement of a worship service; it identifies the two great *actions* of Christian worship. Exodus 24 is not the only place, by any means, where we are taught what a worship service *is* and is *supposed to do*, but it is one of the first texts where these questions are answered in some programmatic way.

First, then, let me prove to you that Exodus 24 has something to say about our contemporary worship as 21<sup>st</sup> century Christians. After all, many evangelicals would no doubt say that, interesting as this may be as a description of the practices of believers in the age of Moses, it has little or nothing to say about our practices 2000 years after the resurrection of Jesus Christ.

It would take too long to demonstrate the general point and, in any case, I have made it and argued it often enough. But we begin by asserting that New Testament worship is the continuation of Old Testament worship, is one with it in principle and spirit, and is different from it only in outward form. This is a conclusion not difficult to prove. The fact that the Apostle Paul, 20 years into his work as the apostle to the Gentiles, twenty years *after* the resurrection of

the Lord, could happily partake of worship in the Jerusalem temple, worship involving blood sacrifice, is one grand demonstration of the fact that there is no difference of theory or principle between OT and NT worship. Most of our instruction in worship is found in the OT and the reason it is not repeated in the NT is simply because it had already been adequately provided in the first 39 books of the Bible. Once the outward changes made necessary and inevitable by the Gentile mission and the establishment of Christian congregations in places where there was no temple and no Levitical priesthood, once those changes were made, worship was what it had always been.

But we can be more specific than that in demonstrating that there is something for us and some direction for our liturgical life here in Exodus 24. What Exodus 24 narrates is, as we said, a ceremony of covenant ratification.

- I. *It would be more accurate, of course, to say that this was a ceremony of covenant renewal.*

After all, Israel didn't begin to be Yahweh's covenant partner here in Exodus 24. God had entered into covenant with Abraham and his seed as far back as Gen. 17 and all of Israel's history to this point was the working out of that covenant relationship. Israel had been Yahweh's people, bound in covenant with him, when she went down to Egypt when Jacob was still alive. She had been his people during her trial in Egypt. We read in 3:24 that Yahweh stirred himself to help Israel because "he remembered his covenant with Abraham, with Isaac, and with Jacob." Yahweh had delivered Israel from bondage in Egypt by his mighty power *precisely because he was her God and she was his people*. "Israel is my firstborn son," the Lord had told Pharaoh through Moses when he demanded Israel's freedom. He identified himself to Israel as "the Lord, the God of your Fathers," [3:16] and to the Egyptians as "the Lord, the God of the Hebrews" [3:18]. The promise he was now fulfilling for Israel – to bring them into the land of Canaan – was the promise he made to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. *The nation of Israel at Mt. Sinai was the seed of the patriarchs and the heirs of the covenant the Lord made with them.*

This is a new covenant being made or ratified at Sinai only in the sense that it is a more elaborate form of an ancient covenant, made to conform to the circumstances not of a large family but of a great nation. *So we begin with that first point, an extraordinarily important one, and often illustrated elsewhere in the Bible as it is illustrated here: the covenant that God has made with us his people is to be repeatedly renewed.*

Here in Exodus 24 we are reminded of that in another striking way. The people made their vow of loyalty to the covenant in 19:8. They made it again in 24:3. They make it again in 24:7. One does not enter covenant with the Lord and then take its existence for granted. That covenant, by God's own appointment, is to be renewed over and over again. That point will be made often and emphatically through the rest of the Pentateuch and, indeed, through the rest of the Bible, but it is already an emphasis here. *We are to declare our loyalty to God's covenant over and over again.* And we are to do that in a formal, corporate way.

- II. *Second, the means, the instruments of that covenant renewal are, here, the common, ordinary elements of biblical worship.*

v. 1 tells us that what is described in the chapter is worship. This is a covenant renewal, but that is *worship*. Covenant renewal is worship and *vice versa*.

We have the reading of God's Word on two occasions here – actually, from the people's viewpoint, *the hearing of God's Word*. I wonder myself whether v. 3, Moses' declaration of God's revelation, the laws of the Book of the Covenant, actually describes something more like what we would call a sermon. In any case, there is the hearing of God's Word which later Scripture shows us often had the form of a sermon, an exposition and application of the Word of God by his priests and prophets.

Then there are the sacrifices of v.5. In the ancient Near East a meal was a part of covenant ratification ceremonies because feasting together was a powerful emblem of peace and friendship. Here there is a meal but it is the meal of sacrifice, the very common and typical burnt offerings and the peace or fellowship offerings of Israel's later worship. These sacrifices, as we know, were not only a central part of the worship of God's people in the ancient epoch but were continued in the new epoch in the Lord's Supper. Lest we doubt that, we have the reference to "the blood of the covenant" in v. 8, which the Lord Jesus, you remember, takes up into the liturgy of the Lord's Supper when he created that liturgy in the Upper Room. This text in Exodus 24, this narrative is the origin of that term, "the blood of the covenant." *Jesus takes it from here*. The very interesting thing is that these sacrifices, as part of the covenant renewal or ratification ceremony, continue with a meal eaten in the presence of the Lord. Meals were occasions of communion between human beings, and in the biblical liturgy of the sacrifice, they are occasions of communion with one another *and with God*.

It is interesting that the sacrifices, especially the thank or fellowship offerings, are said to be offered *before the Lord* (2 Sam. 6:17; 1 Kgs. 8:63). Still more striking – in that in Holy Scripture there is no thought and can be no thought either of God as a physical being or of his dependence upon man or his need for food – the food of the sacrifice is nevertheless referred to as "the food of God" [Lev. 21:6, 8, 17; 22:25; cf. von Rad, *OT Theology*, i, 254].

All of this language suggests what, after all, is suggested plainly by the narrative of Exodus 24 itself, viz. that the meal eaten by Moses and Aaron, Nadab and Abihu, and the seventy elders, was eaten in the presence of God as a ceremonial meal symbolic of the covenant relationship that now exists between the Lord and Israel, which is being renewed in this ritual. Just as the altar and the pillars represented the two parties, and the blood was sprinkled on the two parties, so the meal is eaten *together*, if not by Yahweh, certainly in his presence and before him. It is a meal of fellowship between the Lord and his people, renewing their covenant.

But we can elaborate this material still further in a very helpful and important way. Our own Jack Collins has written a learned article on this subject. ["The Eucharist as Christian Sacrifice," *WTJ* 66/1 (Spring 2004) 1-17]. In that article he points out several things.

1. First, the peace or fellowship offering was the offering or sacrifice, the food of which was eaten *by the worshippers*. If you read the regulations for the various sacrifices in Lev. 1-7, you will find that the burnt offering was entirely consumed on the altar (1:9), while the

grain offerings, sin offerings, and guilt offerings provided food for the priests to eat (2:3; 6:26-30; 7:6). The peace offering, or what the NIV calls the fellowship offering here in 24:5, was different in that the people ate the food cooked on the altar.

2. This peace offering *was a blood sacrifice*, that is, there is in it the idea of the removal of the worshipper's sin by the blood of the sacrifice, but that is not the most prominent idea of this sacrifice, as it is, for example, of the burnt offering. But it is clear, nevertheless, that the thanksgiving and joy, the enjoyment of fellowship with God that is expressed by the peace offering, the idea of communion with God that is the key idea of this offering, all of that can take place *only because the sinfulness of the worshipper has been removed and he is at peace with God*. The language of making atonement is not used with this offering, but the idea is nevertheless present in the blood sacrifice. The fellowship and communion with God is founded on forgiveness! [3-4]
3. In this peace offering the worshippers eat and rejoice before the Lord, or, literally, as here in Exodus 24, "before the face of the Lord" [Deut. 12:7]. As one scholar put it, "In the peace offering the meal was the principal feature; and if this represented the most intimate fellowship with Jehovah, friendly [communion], house and table companionship with Him, we must seek in this the end and the object of the sacrifice." [J.H. Kurtz, *Sacrificial Worship of the OT*, 175 in Collins, 4]

Jack then goes on to argue that the peace offering is the truest antecedent of the Lord's Supper, even more than the Passover, as the Lord himself demonstrates by citing Exodus 24:8 in the institution of the Lord's Supper in the Upper Room. We know it is the peace offering not the burnt offering, also mentioned in v. 5, because only the meat of the peace offering was consumed by the worshippers, as it is here. The Lord's Supper, as has often been argued is a *sacrificial meal*, not in the Roman Catholic sense that a sacrifice is actually being offered each time the Mass is said, but in that the food being eaten in fellowship with the Lord is the food of the once-for-all offered sacrifice of Christ.

What is more, the central meaning of the eating of the Lord's Supper is that it is an act of fellowship with the Lord, of communion with him. God's people eat and drink *before him*, in his presence, and they do so joyfully and thankfully, aware of what an astonishing thing it is to be brought into intimate, loving communion with the Living God whom no man has seen or can see. So far, Jack Collins.

Taking all of this material together, we have a covenant renewal or ratification ceremony here, a ceremony that takes up the elements of the ordinary liturgy of worship in both the OT and the NT. It assumes the presence of God with his people and a dialogue between them; the reading and hearing of his Word, the promise of his people to believe and obey, and a meal that not only signifies and seals the covenant relationship, the family bond, the peace and fellowship between God and his people but is an occasion of enjoying that fellowship.

What we have here, then, is a *theory of divine worship*. The chapter begins telling us that what follows is a description of worship. That worship happens to be a covenant renewal. What worship is in the OT and what it is in the NT is a ceremony of covenant renewal. When all of these elements in the narrative of Exodus 24 are repeated time and time again in the liturgical instruction of God's people – in the regulations governing their regular worship of the Lord – it

becomes clear that what we have here is the pattern of divine worship: a covenant renewal ceremony with two foci: the Word of God with our grateful response in a promise to obey and a sacrificial meal in which we enjoy the communion with God that his covenant with us creates. What we find in Exodus 24 we find everywhere else in the instructions concerning the worship of God and we find it for the same reason: it is in this way that our covenant with the Lord is renewed.

We learn elsewhere that adorning these two central acts of worship, the Word and the meal, are other things – hymns and prayers and offerings – but these two acts, *in that order*, are the substance of a covenant renewal ceremony, *and that ceremony is everywhere the substance of Christian worship. The things done in worship, in other words, are those things that serve to renew and re-ratify the covenant between the Lord and his people.*

This has very important implications for the current debate about Christian worship. It means, for example, that worship is for Christians. We may be happy to have unbelievers present, but there is no covenant to be renewed between God and unbelievers. The covenant can be renewed only on the part of those who belong to it. Unbelievers are, properly, only spectators at a Christian worship service, not participants, and such a service must be deformed and denatured if it is designed with the unbeliever in mind. In worship the Lord is present, as we learn here in Exodus 24, to renew his covenant with us. We are to be conscious of that presence, grateful for it, and humble before it. It is the living God who has drawn near to say to us once more that we are his people. And this is the God whom no one can see; whom these men saw only in the sense that they saw his glory reflected in the sapphire pavement upon which he stood. To have such a God draw near, to have him speak to us, to have him call us his children and his people, is a privilege beyond all conceivable privileges and we are guilty of no more consequential sin than that we are always forgetting what an indescribable wonder this is!

Second, just as the hearing of God's Word, the Lord's Supper, the covenant meal, must be a part of that Lord's Day worship, for it too is a primary element in a proper ceremony of covenant renewal. I am so pleased that we are celebrating the Supper every Sunday. So many Christians miss this privilege. Worship without the meal is not fully biblical, is seriously sub-biblical, and much of modern evangelical worship is now even less sacramental than it used to be. Many of the modern megachurches almost never or never have the Lord's Supper on the Lord's Day with the full congregation present. It is thought to be an obstacle to the full acceptance of the unsaved in the service, something that would make them uncomfortable, that would make them feel awkward. To have the Lord's Supper, in which they could not participate, would advertise the fact that they do not belong to the church and are not fully accepted. But, by the standards of Holy Scripture and of Christian history, this is a serious mistake. I am so pleased that it has become, through changes, the fixed, central, climactic element in our worship that it has. It means for us what eating before the Lord meant for those favored men half-way up Mt. Sinai and we must never, never forget that.

Third, there is an order to be observed in divine worship. There is a logic because such a service has a particular, specific purpose. Did you notice the three-fold repetition of the verb "took" in vv. 6-8? Moses *took* half the blood and sprinkled it on the altar, he *took* the Book of the Covenant, and then he *took* the other half of the blood and sprinkled it on the people. Separate,

distinct acts in a logical order. Christian worship should be like that so that the logic, the gospel, covenantal rationale of the service is obvious and its implications powerful and unmistakable upon sincere hearts.

There are other implications, to be sure, of seeing our Lord's Day worship as a service of covenant renewal.

But as important as may be the implications of this material in Exodus 24 for thinking about the order and content of a Christian worship service on the Lord's Day, it is still more important for you and me as we come to this house of a Lord's Day to remember what it is that we are doing and what we are about in church. The Lord is renewing his covenant with us and we with him. He is present to speak his word to us and to hear us swear our fealty to him and to join us in a meal of happy fellowship. The impossibly high God stooping down to be with and enjoy his children as they eat this holy food in his presence. *That is Christian worship, every Sunday, and we ought to come to it in anticipation and leave it with a sense of wonder that the Living God has, once again, renewed his relationship with us. We are his and he is ours and, if that is true, then we are, no matter what else may be happening in our lives, we are a most favored and happy people.* We have a life to live and divine fellowship to enjoy.