

SESSION 1

“a god so near to it as the Lord our God is to us”

MODERN DISCOVERIES OF ANCIENT CONTEXT.

The Egyptian–Hittite Peace Treaty, dated 1269 BC, was first translated from Egyptian tablets in the 1820’s by Champollion, of Rosetta Stone fame. It was not until 1906 that Hugo Winckler’s excavations in Asia Minor unearthed the Hittite counterparts to that same treaty, among thousands of other royal documents in cuneiform tablets. These documents brought to light new understandings of the Sinia Covenant. Most notably, the Hittites’ prolific use of Suzerain–Vassal Treaties as a geopolitical strategy for ruling their expanding empire, which stretched from Egypt’s northern border (in central Canaan at that time) to the Black Sea—encompassing modern day Jordan, Syria, and much of Turkey.

COMMON ELEMENTS OF THE HITTITE EMPIRE’S SUZERAIN-VASSAL TREATY.

- Preamble describing the Suzerain’s favor shown to the Vassal.
- Demand for loyalty combined with cult worship, idols of the Suzerain and/or the Suzerain’s gods integrated into the Vassal’s public religious practices.
- Often required a tribute—something of the Vassal’s resources set aside for the Suzerain
- Requirements for how foreigners would be treated, including extradition of political refugees and/or enslavement of other peoples for the benefit of the Suzerain.

And, as the Egyptian–Hittite Peace Treaty demonstrated, the terms of this covenant would be inscribed on **two tablets**, one to reside with each party.

EXODUS 19.

For context, this is after the burning bush, the 10 plagues and the Hebrews’ ultimate escape from Egyptian slavery, as well as the miraculous provision of manna and quail in the desert. But it’s before Israel has entered and taken possession of their promised land, Canaan. Israel is a tribe without a land, not yet a nation.

[Read Ex. 19:3–6]

Notice the treaty language?

There's a preamble. There's a "covenant" described. And, if they keep the covenant, what will they be to God?

1. **Treasured Possession. In Hebrew, "Segullah."**

This word is used only eight times in the Old Testament, six reiterating this same promise, and twice referring to the King's treasury. And, precisely because God forbade the Israelites from making similar treaties with other nations, we have no other use of this word in Hebrew in any other texts. It appears to be a cognate—a borrowed word from other semitic languages. "The related ancient languages of Ugaritic and Akkadian both employ an equivalent word to refer to someone who enjoys a special status in relation to the king, a covenant partner who is especially treasured and entrusted with greater responsibility."¹

2. **Kingdom of Priests and a holy nation.**

Holy, meaning simply "set apart for a purpose," and in this instance that purpose is to be priests. But what does it mean for a nation to act as priest among nations. We will see some clues as we study Exodus this weekend. As the priests among the Israelites are given their duties, we can learn more about what it would mean to be a kingdom of God's priests.

¹ Carmen Joy Imes, *Bearing God's Name: Why Sinai Still Matters* (InterVarsity Press, 2019), page 31

EXODUS 20: THE TEN WORDS.

The phrase “Ten Commandments” appears nowhere in the Bible. Instead, the list that appears in Exodus 20 is referred to in Exodus 34:28, Deuteronomy 4:13 and 10:4 as the ten words (Hebrew “dabar” or Greek “logos”), as if to say “topics” or “issues.” It’s also important not to read words like “laws” and “statutes” from our Western experience where there is rule-of-law, governed by a discreet set of specific prohibitions.

This Law is a set of topics, followed by a series of examples (“case law,” if you will) in chapters 21-24. Elders who served as judges would meditate on the words to gain wisdom from Yahweh so they could be equipped to mete out justice in any circumstance, without treating it as we would a Western linear, logical ruleset. This is why David speaks of meditating on the law in Psalm 1. Nobody meditates on rules. But this law is not merely rules.

Because these are topics of meditation, not a ruleset, when God repeats the same ten words in renewal, following the golden calf incident, he restates and expounds on the first four with more meditation for Moses

<i>Original Word from Exodus 20.</i>	<i>Expanded Restatement from Exodus 34.</i>
20:3	34:11-16
20:4-6	34:17
20:7	34:18-20
20:8-11	34:21-26

The first word: You shall have no other gods before Yahweh. That word “before” has been problematic, until we think in Suzerain-Vassal Treaty terms. The expanded instruction makes that clear in chapter 34. Making a covenant would entail blending religions. Any covenant with another nation would necessarily include idols of that nation’s gods integrated into Israel’s public worship.

The second word: You shall not make for yourself a carved image. In chapter 34, this command becomes a more pointed object lesson from the golden calf incident, in which the Israelites did not turn to other gods, but rather they depicted Yahweh with cast metal. So, why no visual worship aids? To answer that, remember that God has already molded an idol of himself, cast of dirt, and breathed into life. “God created man in His own [image/icon/idol].” – Genesis 1:27. So, how can Mankind depict the worship-worthy aspects of God?

The third word: You shall not take the name of the Lord your God in vain. While this commandment often gets interpreted as a prohibition on some forms of speaking God’s name, the Hebrew verb “nasa,” translated “take” in the ESV, literally means to lift and/or bear something. Speech is not in view here.

Elsewhere in Exodus, we see the same verb and an example of bearing names. As Aaron, the priest, ministered in the Tabernacle he would wear stones on his vest with the names of the tribes of Israel engraved. “And Aaron shall bear (nasa) their names before the Lord” (Exodus 28:12). Aaron was also to wear a plate on his forehead with the word “holy” and the name “Yahweh” written on it. “It shall be on the front of the turban. It shall be on Aaron’s forehead” (Exodus 28:36–37).

The restated corollary of this third word in Exodus 34 has no obvious connection to a reader unfamiliar with the text. But what’s commanded in Exodus 34:18–20 is to keep the Passover, and specifically, the redemption of the firstborn at the Passover. Read what God told Moses about the Passover at its first institution:

“And when in time to come your son asks you, ‘What does this mean?’ you shall say to him, ‘By a strong hand the Lord brought us out of Egypt, from the house of slavery. For when Pharaoh stubbornly refused to let us go, the Lord killed all the firstborn in the land of Egypt, both the firstborn of man and the firstborn of animals. Therefore I sacrifice to the Lord all the males that first open the womb, but all the firstborn of my sons I redeem.’ It shall be as a mark on your hand or **frontlets between your eyes**, for by a strong hand the Lord brought us out of Egypt.” – Exodus 13:14–16 (emphasis mine)

Frontlets, or Phylacteries, became a significant part of later Jewish tradition. Small boxes would contain words of this covenant, written on small pieces of paper, and worn literally on one’s forehead. But that misses the point in Exodus 13, where acting out the law was itself the frontlet—not writing out the law and carrying it in a literal frontlet.

Later, in Deuteronomy, remembering and retelling the Law is said to be one's frontlet.

"And these words that I command you today shall be on your heart. You shall teach them diligently to your children, and shall talk of them when you sit in your house, and when you walk by the way, and when you lie down, and when you rise. You shall bind them as a sign on your hand, and **they shall be as frontlets** between your eyes." – Deuteronomy 6:6-8 (emphasis mine)

Rather than a prohibition on irreverent speech, the third word teaches us that God's people are not to carry His name without carrying out His will. That is why David says in Psalm 23, "He leads me in paths of righteousness for his **name's** sake." God's treaty with Israel demanded they both remain devoted to Yahweh and remain devoted to His model of justice.

The fourth word: Remember the sabbath day and keep it set apart. This fourth word begins the hinge between, as the Heidelberg Catechism says, how we ought to live in relation to God and what we owe our neighbor.

1. The vassal's tribute is to rest. As the Suzerain's treasured possession, Israel was given possession of the choicest land—most fertile, able to produce a bounty for the Suzerain. One might assume the Suzerain would want it maximized. But not so. His "tribute" from the land, as it were, was to rest. What was set aside from the vassal's productivity was set aside for rest.

The weekly sabbath is just the start. The corollary in Exodus 34: 21-26 expands to include three festivals per year. What we should notice is that rest is a good part of God's design for His people in many different ways.

3. Rest is for everyone. The vassal, as treasured possession, does not enjoy rest in its privileged position by exacting it from subordinates. The entire household, livestock, servants, and even the foreigner are to partake of this rest. Today, we often rest by someone else's work—a waiter, a bellhop, hotel housekeeping, etc. But Israel had to intentionally plan and work ahead, in order for everyone to rest.

If Israel did not set aside rest, which is God's good design for human flourishing, even for the foreigner in their lands, then they would not be bearing his name properly, they would not be an idol that resembled the true nature of Yahweh, because they would not be bringing His justice to all people.

CONCLUSION OF SESSION 1.

God chose to convey His plan for His people using terms that, in their context, would have significant meaning—a treaty format they had seen only world super-powers proffer until now. But they were no political force. God chose a people with no land and nothing to offer. God elevated them from Egypt's slave class to being the Creator-God's *segullah*.

We know from the Egyptian-Hittite Treaty, the two stone tablets were to go reside with each party. One was discovered in the Hittite capital, and a duplicate thousands of miles away in Egypt's capital. When God inscribed the statutes of His treaty on two stone tablets, where did they both go? Both tablets went into the Ark of the Covenant. God did not reside far off, He dwelt among his people.

**“What great nation is there that has a god so near to it
as the Lord our God is to us.”**

As God's *segullah*, Israel had the role of representing His character—being His image and bearing His name—to the world. What would that character look like? Up next, Session 2: “Statutes and rules so righteous as all this law.”