



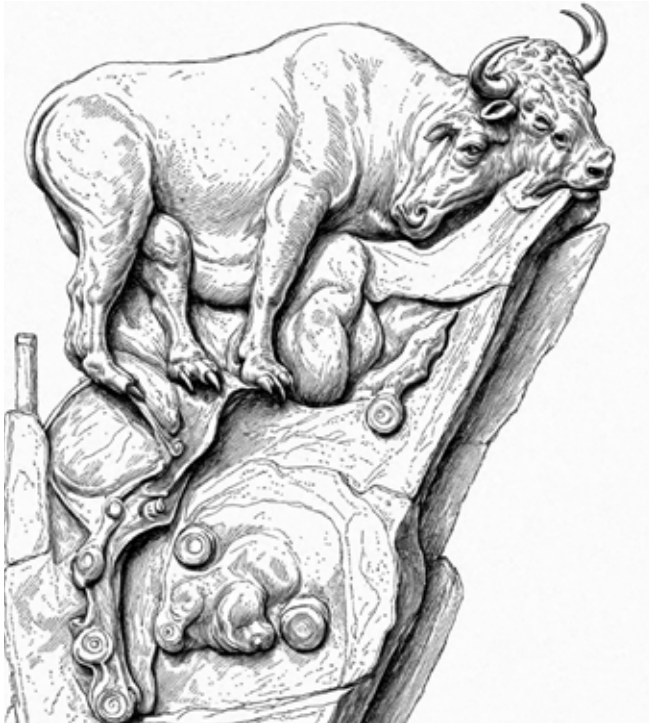
## THE BOOK OF THE COVENANT

Exodus 20:22–24:11

Israel was called into a unique relationship with God as His chosen people. As such, they were to reflect the character of God in every minute aspect of their lives. Like Israel, we who are followers of Jesus Christ also are to be living testimonies to God and His grace.

I don't know about you, but legal documents make me wonder if there's some small print somewhere that I had better read. We call it the fine print of the law.

Well, in this study we're going to explore a legal arrangement into which God and Israel entered—a covenant arrangement with real terms and consequences. And God isn't hiding anything in the fine print. It will be very clear to the nation of Israel.



Bull palette from Pre-dynastic Egypt

This section of Exodus, from chapter 20, verse 22 through verse 11 of chapter 24, is referred to as the “Book of the Covenant.” It follows the style of a legal agreement, beginning with an opening statement that sets the tone and basis for the agreement. God says to Moses in Exodus 20:22:

*“Thus you shall say to the people of Israel: ‘You have seen for yourselves that I have talked with you from heaven.’”*

The tone the Lord is setting here is one of authoritative grace. He sets all the terms because He's God. And the fact that God is talking to them at all communicates that His grace is the basis for Israel to obey these legal terms.

Now verse 23 gives the context of the covenant. God says, “You shall not make gods of silver to be with me, nor shall you make for yourselves gods of gold,” He's saying in effect, “Worshiping Me on my terms is the heart of this covenant.”

Verse 24 then begins a long section, listing the stipulations, or requirements, specified by the covenant. Here God lays down a series of laws that directs Israel's worship and civil and moral life as a nation.



Prominent in this section is what is called case law. Specific laws are spelled out, along with the prescribed judgments for violating them. These laws are included to help the judges appointed by Moses make just decisions. So, this section gives examples or precedents to follow.

For instance, we read in Exodus 21:33:

*“When a man digs a pit and does not cover it, and an ox or a donkey falls into it, the owner of the pit shall make restoration. He shall give money to its owner, and the dead beast shall be his.”*

This law is representative of something that *can* happen and explains what to do *if* it happens.

I’m thankful for the case law in chapter 21 that addresses slavery. Let’s anchor here for a moment. That there are laws at all in God’s Word about slavery is proof that God is concerned about cruelty against people. But some clarity might help a terribly misunderstood biblical topic.

There are two kinds of life situations that are described by the term *slavery* in our Bible translations. The first is the forced service of one person to another—like Joseph, who was sold into slavery, and like the Israelites, who were slaves in Egypt for 430 years! You will find that Scripture describes this kind of slavery but never condones it.

The second situation was when people could no longer support themselves, usually because of debt. They hired themselves out to work, becoming *bond servants*, though your translation may use the word *slaves*.

Bond servants were given room and board, and they were given a paycheck that allowed them to eventually repay the debt that landed them in this predicament in the first place. But even if the bond servant can’t pay off his debt, Exodus 21:2 limits his service to only six years.

And when the bond servant is serving his master—

essentially his employer—and they treat each other according to God’s law and character, something interesting can happen. We read in verses 5-6:

*“But if the slave [bond servant] plainly says, ‘I love my master . . . I will not go out free,’ then his master shall bring him to God, and he shall bring him to the door or the doorpost. And his master shall bore his ear through with an awl, and he shall be his slave forever.”*

Beloved, this kind of arrangement that is anchored in the love of God is what the apostles Paul, Peter, James, and Jude all have in mind when they describe themselves as bond servants of Christ.

Another feature of the Book of the Covenant is what we can call the sanctions. These are blessings and curses that serve as incentives for fulfilling the demands of the covenant.

For instance, in chapter 23, The Lord promises His presence, saying in verses 20-21, “Behold, I send an angel before you to guard you on the way . . . obey his voice . . . for my name is in him.” This is *the* Angel of the Lord, a mysterious manifestation of God the Son.

The people are to obey this Angel, and there’s plenty of positive incentive for doing so. The Lord promises in verse 22, “But if you carefully obey his voice . . . I will be an enemy to your enemies.” Notice here that their obedience preceded His protection.

Now there is negative incentive too. The Lord warns in verse 21 that if they rebel against Him, “he will not pardon [their] transgression”; if they follow the gods of the surrounding nations, God says down in verse 33, “It will surely be a snare to you.”

In other words, Israel is to worship, obey, and serve God in faith and depend entirely on His grace to keep their side of this legal, covenant agreement.



So, we have the terms here in these chapters, including the sanctions—both positive and negative incentives. Now we’ve reached the ratification. This is the legal ceremony binding the two parties together—this is where they sign on the dotted line. And it involves a formal process.

First, Moses communicates the terms of the covenant to the people of Israel here in Exodus 24:3:

*Moses came and told the people all the words of the LORD and all the rules. And all the people answered with one voice and said, “All the words that the LORD has spoken we will do.”*

Now *no one* can say, “I didn’t see the fine print—I didn’t know about that” or “I didn’t agree to that!” No, they’re saying, “We agree with *all* the terms of the covenant.”

Second, there is documentation. Verse 4 records that “Moses wrote down all the words of the LORD.” By the way, think about the fact that you and I are studying today what the Lord preserved from the very day Moses wrote the words down! Here’s the documentation. How reliable is God’s word!

Third, the legal agreement must be ratified. So, Moses sets up an altar at the base of the mountain, along with twelve stone pillars representing the twelve tribes of Israel, who are entering this covenant agreement.

The covenant is ratified, or sealed, by blood. Oxen are sacrificed on the altar. Moses collects the blood of the sacrifices and throws half of it on the altar, which represents the presence of God. Then in verse 7, the other half of the blood is ceremonially sprinkled on the people; and that seals the deal.

By the way, have you noticed how God works through

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a mediator as He relates to His people? Moses, the mediator, is a picture of the coming, final Mediator between God and mankind, Jesus Christ, who seals the deal between us and our Heavenly Father—a covenant relationship that will never end, through faith in the shed blood of our Savior

Being a bond-servant to Jesus isn’t automatic - you choose it by faith. Describe the ways your life with Jesus reflects the bondservant-master bond. What typically hinders or enhances this relationship for you?

The Israelites were quick to commit themselves to obeying the LORD - only to quickly fall short. Read and then apply Luke 14:25-33 to your life as you commit yourself to living faithfully by God’s word.

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