



The Covenant Code (Exodus 20:22 - 23:19)

This code may have been composed during the reign of Hezekiah at the end of the 8th century BC, but it expresses quite ancient customs.

Some is specifically Israelite. Some is an expression of tribal custom, parallels to which can be found in other ANE cultures.

1. Exodus 22:21

‘You shall not wrong or oppress a resident alien, for you were aliens in the land of Egypt.’

2. Exodus 22:22-24

‘You shall not abuse any widow or orphan. If you do abuse them, when they cry out to me, I will surely heed their cry; my wrath will burn, and I will kill you with the sword, and your wives shall become widows and your children orphans.’

3. Exodus 22:25-27

‘If you lend money to my people, to the poor among you, you shall not deal with them as a creditor; you shall not exact interest from them. If you take your neighbour’s cloak in pawn, you shall restore it before the sun goes down; for it may be your neighbour’s only clothing to use as cover; in what else shall that person sleep? And if your neighbour cries out to me, I will listen, for I am compassionate [hannun].’

4. Law concerning festivals (Exodus 23:14-17).

Three times in the year you shall hold a festival for me. You shall observe the festival of unleavened bread [beginning of spring barley harvest]; as I commanded you, you shall eat unleavened bread for seven days at the appointed time in the month of Abib [Nisan in Hebrew calendar], for in it you came out of Egypt. No one shall appear before me empty-handed.

4. Law concerning festivals (Exodus 23:14-17).

You shall observe the festival of harvest [wheat harvest in early summer], of the first fruits of your labour, of what you sow in the field.

You shall observe the festival of ingathering [autumn olives & grapes] at the end of the year, when you gather in from the field the fruit of your labour. Three times in the year all your males shall appear before the Lord YHWH.

- 5. Ratification of the Covenant (Exodus 24:1-18)
- Key to the place of sacrifice in Israel, is the recognition of the holiness (transcendence) of God (see the vision of Isaiah, Isaiah 6:1-5). The holy cannot mix with the 'impure' (the ordinary). These must be kept separate - hence the ritual purifications so important in Israel. Hence only Moses, the priest, is able to approach God. Hence the sanctuary which only those especially purified can enter. To make something holy (to sacrifice, sanctify, consecrate) is to set it apart from the ordinary. In Exodus 33 Moses sets up a tent for God outside the camp.

Exodus 24:1-4

Then YHWH said to Moses, “Come up to YHWH, you and Aaron, Nadab, and Abihu [= sons of Aaron, Exodus 6:23] and seventy of the elders of Israel, and worship at a distance. Moses alone shall come near YHWH; but the others shall not come near, and the people shall not come up with him.” Moses came and told the people all the words of YHWH and all the edicts.

words = Ten ‘Words’ (Exodus 20:1-17)

edicts = ‘Book of the Covenant’ (Exodus 20:22 - 23:19).

- Exodus 24:1-4

and all the people answered with one voice, and said,
“All the words that YHWH has spoken we will do.”
And Moses wrote down all the words of YHWH.

Exodus 24:4-8

Moses rose early in the morning, and built an altar at the foot of the mountain, and set up twelve pillars, corresponding to the twelve tribes of Israel. He sent young men of the people of Israel, who offered burnt offerings and sacrificed oxen as communion sacrifices to YHWH. Moses took half of the blood and put it in basins, and half of the blood he dashed against the altar.

Exodus 24:4-8

Then he took the book of the covenant, and read it in the hearing of the people; and they said, “All that YHWH has spoken we will do, and we will be obedient.” Moses took the blood and dashed it on the people, and said, “See the blood of the covenant that YHWH has made with you in accordance with all these words.”

Exodus 24:9-11

Then Moses and Aaron, Nadab, and Abihu, and seventy of the elders of Israel went up, and they saw the God of Israel. Under his feet there was something like a pavement of sapphire stone, like the very heaven for clearness. God did not lay his hand on the chief men of the people of Israel; also they beheld God, and they ate and drank.

Exodus 24:12-14

YHWH said to Moses, “Come up to me on the mountain, and wait there; and I will give you the tablets of stone, with the law and the commandment, which I have written for their instruction.”

So Moses set out with his assistant Joshua, and Moses went up into the mountain of God.

To the elders he had said, “Wait here for us, until we come to you again; for Aaron and Hur are with you; whoever has a dispute may go to them.”

Exodus 24:15-18

Then Moses went up on the mountain, and the cloud covered the mountain. The glory of YHWH settled on Mount Sinai, and the cloud covered it for six days; on the seventh day he called to Moses out of the cloud. Now the appearance of the glory of YHWH was like a devouring fire on the top of the mountain in the sight of the people of Israel. Moses entered the cloud, and went up on the mountain. Moses was on the mountain for forty days and forty nights.

- In the New Testament there is a dramatic and revolutionary change. Holiness is still a central concept, but now we learn, through the experience of Jesus, that God 'pitched his tent among us'(John 1:14). No wonder those versed in the law were scandalised when Jesus ate with sinners. They were anxious to not pollute the sacred by contact with the ordinary. Jesus shows that God, the Holy One, wants to come into contact with what is not holy in order to make it holy. There is no other way.

When Jesus asks if Peter is going to leave him, Peter replies that he has nowhere to go: 'We have come to believe and know that you are the Holy One of God'(John 6:69).

Jesus gave himself ('offered himself up' , 'sacrificed himself') for us and he continued to give himself in love even on the cross. Others, for their own motives, wrenched his life from him. But He, even in this desperate place, showed us how to pour forth our life in obedience to God and in love and forgiveness for us. This is the perfect sacrifice.

The Letter to the Hebrews insists that the ancient sacrifices have been replaced. No longer do we express our desire for a blood-union with God by offering up the life (= the blood) from the best of our herd. Jesus has shown us that the offering which God wants is the offering of ourselves (= our 'blood').

Hebrews 9:11-14

‘When Christ came as a high priest of the good things that have come, then through the greater and perfect tent (not made with hands, that is, not of this creation), he entered once for all into the Holy Place, not with the blood of goats and calves, but with his own blood, thus obtaining eternal redemption. For if the blood of goats and bulls, with the sprinkling of the ashes of a heifer, sanctifies those who have been defiled so that their flesh is purified, how much more will the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered himself without blemish to God, purify our conscience from dead works to worship the living God!’

So it is that at the Last Supper, Jesus quotes from the passage we are studying in Exodus, now speaking of the ‘new covenant in my blood’(ICorinthians 11:25 = Luke 22:20; see also Hebrews 9:18-20).

For us to become holy is to allow God who has now pitched his tent, not outside the camp, but among us – indeed within us.

Holiness is the communion of the real self with the real God, the liberating God, the God of the Exodus and the Father of Jesus. Since God is love, holiness is, as expressed by the Vatican Council:

‘The holiness of the Church is constantly shown forth in the fruits of grace which the Spirit produces in the faithful, And so it must be. It is expressed by individuals who, each in his or her own state of life, tend to the perfection of love’(LG, 39).

The NT is full of calls to holiness. We are to open our hearts and minds and bodies to God who longs to 'pitch his tent' within us and among us. God has come into the depths of our hearts and our poor, broken communities. Jesus, the Holy One of God, delights to be with us sinners, for this is the only way we can let sin go and embrace the holy one.

- ‘Christ’s faithful should be instructed by God’s word, and be nourished at the table of the Lord’s body. They should give thanks to God. Offering the immaculate victim not only through the hands of the priest but also together with him, they should learn to offer themselves. Through Christ the mediator they should be drawn day by day into ever more perfect union with God and each other so that finally God may be all in all’(SC).
- ‘Worshipping everywhere by their holy actions, the laity consecrate the world itself to God’(LG 34).