

Bible Study # 32 Exodus 19.1–25 03–15–2021

In chapter 24, mention is made of Moses writing down ‘everything the Lord had said’ (24:4), and then that ‘he took the Book of the Covenant and read it to the people’ (24:7). These references raise various questions that have stimulated considerable discussion.

The most common position is to say that the Book of the Covenant comprises 20:22–23:33, that is, the section following the Decalogue until the start of the passage describing the confirmation of the covenant at Sinai. As the text itself does not specify the contents, an exegetical decision has to be made as to what parts of the previous sections were incorporated in it.

First, though, a comment needs to be made on the Hebrew phrase in 24:7 which has been translated into English as ‘the book of the covenant). This translation goes back as far as the King James translation of 1611, probably drawing on the Latin Vulgate (*volumen foederis*) and the LXX (*to biblion tês diathêkês*).

The use of ‘book’ is an anachronism, since the earliest books were codices originating probably in the first century a.d. Sheets of papyrus were stitched so that various documents were bound together, and this format later developed into our present books. In translating the Old Testament text the Hebrew word should be translated as ‘scroll’ or ‘document’, not book.

The content of the scroll of the covenant is uncertain, but serious questions must be asked about the common view that it only embraces material following the Decalogue. The reference in 24:4 to writing down all the words of the Lord must refer to the preceding verse (‘When Moses went and told the people all the Lord’s words and laws’).

This in turn must go back to 21:1: ‘These are the laws you are to set before them’. But in 20:22 there is mention of God’s speaking to Moses, and hence, in accordance with the common view, 20:22–26 are also to be reckoned as part of the covenant scroll. But the further question then arises: Can we look back even earlier than 20:22 to view material that could have been part of that scroll?

In 24:7 it is said that in sprinkling the blood of the sacrifice on the people, Moses said: ‘This is the blood of the covenant that the Lord has made with you in accordance with all these words’. That appears to indicate that the events of chapter 24 (the ratification of the covenant) were carried out in obedience to the full covenantal provisions, including the Decalogue.

This means that what follows is the expansion and explanation of the basic principles asserted in the Decalogue. Hence, the Decalogue must be the foundation on which the following chapters are based, and must be regarded as an important part of the content of the scroll of the covenant.

The issue of the content of the scroll needs also to embrace consideration of chapter 19. It is programmatic of what follows, for it is proclaiming the new relationship of Israel to the Lord – a priestly kingdom with access to the divine presence. This means that the contents of chapter 19 link in with 24:1–11 almost as anticipation and realization, with a very definite association between 19:3b–8 with 24:3–8.

Though not strongly supported in current discussions, if the main contents of chapter 19 are closely linked with the Decalogue and its exposition in 20:1–23:33, then it seems most probable that the scroll of the covenant should be viewed as incorporating the place of Israel.

Hence, in the discussion that follows I will understand the content of that scroll to contain virtually all of God’s revelation to Israel embodied in chapters 19–23. Most of you may regard this as kind of a worthless discussion,

however, the Covenant is central to the story of God and the people of Israel. Therefore it is important to try to determine the content of the ‘The scroll of the Covenant.’”

Ultimately, what is important for them at that time and for us today is this: Do we pick and choose which words of God are important? Or do we believe everything he says is important, even if you and I do not understand its significance fully at this time. This question will be significant if we are to get value out of all the specific instructions we are going to get about building the tabernacle.

I know for a long time, I was bored by reading so and so begat so and so. The genealogies are avoided by many readers of the Bible. Once I saw them as proof that God knows each of us by name and our place in the history of his people, I had a new appreciation of those lists. I can imagine a time in as few as 100 years when someone might read my genealogy and say, “Who care about Milan Weerts?” My answer is: God does and always will!

We continue our study next with Exodus 20:1–7.