

Bible Study # 35 20.22–21.11 03–18–2021

Prior to setting out the implications of the Decalogue for daily living, these verses set out two significant features of Israel's worship. The first relates to idolatry, while the second concerns the place of sacrifice, the altar. The first of these reinforces the second Word (20:4), while the second anticipates fuller instructions that follow later (27:1-8).

The Lord gave Moses explicit instructions to pass on to the people. 'Thus you shall say to the people of Israel' specified that the communication was to be exactly as God told him. The message commenced with reference to the knowledge the people had that God had indeed spoken to them from heaven.

The reference to 'seeing' ('you have seen for yourselves') does not imply actual sight of God, for the verb 'see' is used, as in verse 18, of perception of a certain fact, not necessarily physical sight.

Nothing could be a substitute for the living God. The prohibition relates to any physical representation of Him. The MT (Masoretic text) is awkward in that it has no object for the verb 'make': 'You shall not make alongside me'. Something is needed and so the NIV adds 'any gods', while another suggestion is 'anything to be'. This meaning is made explicit in the following clause: 'do not make for yourselves gods of silver or gold'.

The prohibition in verse 23 is stated as a plural, whereas in this verse the instruction is narrowed down to the individual. Limits were placed upon the type of altar that Israel could use. Here it is specified that it was to be of earth, while in verse 25 one of undressed stones was permissible, whereas in 27:1 it is said that it could be of acacia wood.

At Arad in southern Israel, an earthen altar has been discovered, having the same measurements as those set out in 27:1. This altar is dated from the period of Solomon. Clearly, they were temporary places of sacrifice, that resembled the altars that had been used in the patriarchal period (see Gen. 12:7; 13:18; 22:9). These altars were for burnt offerings and fellowship offerings.

The first sacrifice was the whole-burnt offering, while the second was the accompanying sacrifice that was eaten by the worshipper(s). The location of altars is described as being wherever the Lord caused His name 'to be honored'. This has been the common understanding of this verb, but more probably it means 'to invoke God's name'.

Liberty was given to Israel to build and use altars in addition to the one at the central sanctuary, this explains Elijah's reference to the many altars in existence in his day (1 Kings 19:10, 14). To the instruction that altars were to be built of earth was added the concession that they could be made of undressed stones, for it would be defiled if a tool had been used.

The tool is referred to as a sword, a word that is used, at times, for any sharp instrument. The same prohibition occurs in Deuteronomy 27:5 and Joshua 8:30-31. The reason was probably twofold. Firstly, the Canaanites had altars built of dressed stones, and secondly, any tool used in the process could easily become an object of veneration and worship. Hence, the need for Israel to avoid a contemporary heathen practice and possible false worship of the tool used in shaping the stones.

The final instruction here regarding these provisional altars was that they should have no steps, so there could be no indecent exposure of the bodies of the priests. Later, steps were permitted, but the priests had to wear linen undergarments (Lev. 6:10 [MT 6:3]; 9:22; Ezek. 44:17-18).

The transition to the descriptive law is marked by this verse, which contains God's words to Moses. He was instructed to set these laws before the people for their benefit, and so they could see the way in which the Decalogue made demands on so many different aspects of their lives.

The opening case study in chapter 21 is one that expands on the sabbatical principle of the Fourth Word and applies it to the situation of Hebrew slaves (cf. the similar laws in Deut. 15:12-18). Particular laws relating to non-Hebrew slaves are given elsewhere (Lev. 25:44-46).

It needs emphasizing that while slavery was a social institution in the Old Testament, and therefore tolerated, it should not be equated with more modern forms of slavery such as the transportation of African slaves to the Caribbean or North America. That infringed the prohibition of kidnapping (Exod. 21:16) and also meant intergenerational slavery.

What is referred to here is debt or temporary slavery, by which a debtor is able to pay his debt by working for his creditor. The slave was the property of his master, but he retained rights as a human made in God's image. The clauses are introduced by 'when', with 'if' being used in subsidiary clauses.

In the sabbatical year (the seventh) he was to be released without any payment being made. The term used to describe the freed slave is one that is almost exclusively used in the Old Testament for freed slaves. Deuteronomy 15:13-14 indicates that in addition to being freed, a slave had to be provided with sustenance, or perhaps fuller provision to give him economic viability.

This release was to take place in the seventh year. Some have suggested this refers to the general sabbatical year, but if so, some slaves would serve much longer periods than others. Most probably, the six years of service started when the slave began to serve his master.

In vs. 3-4, two 'if' clauses follow. If the slave came into this bonded relationship by himself, he was to go out alone. However, if he was already married when that bonded relationship to his master began, then both husband and wife were to go free.

The situation was different if his master gave a wife to the slave. In that case, the wife, and any children born to them, were to remain as the possession of the master. This seems harsh to us, but it was typical of other Ancient Near East cultures.

The continuation of voluntary servitude was a possibility. If the slave expressed his willingness to remain in the bonded relationship because he loved his master, then a particular ceremony to give effect to that was necessary. His master had to take him before 'God' and against a door or doorpost and pierce his ear with an awl.

Various questions arise here, relating to the translation of 'elohîm, and whether there are two stages in the process (indicated by the double use of the verb, (shall bring), 'his master shall bring him to God, and he shall bring him to the door'). While it is correct that 'elohîm can refer to judges (cf. Exod. 22:7-8; Ps. 82:1, 6), it is best to retain the rendering 'God' here, and suggest that what is intended is, first, bringing the slave to the sanctuary, and then taking him to have his ear pierced.

Coming to the sanctuary may have involved an oath of some kind, while the ear-piercing could be performed by the slave owner. The slave would then be indentured to his master for life. The MT says that he shall serve his master 'forever'. but in contexts such as this clearly means for the term of his natural life.

The vs. 7-11 discusses the sale (dowry?) of a daughter, not a slave. They are concerned with the case of a woman who is sold to become the wife (or perhaps, concubine) of a man or, more probably, his son. While it

is not stated explicitly in the text, the probable scenario is a case where a family were in debt, and in order to cover that debt, 'sell' a daughter to another family.

The man accepting the arrangement would have a double advantage from it. He would cover the debt he was owed, and also he would find a wife for his son. While the woman was regarded as a female servant, she had rights that had to be respected. If she did not please her new master, she could be redeemed by her own family (v. 8).

This provision uses the word for 'redeem' that is used elsewhere of God's redemption of his people from slavery in Egypt (Deut. 15:15; 24:18). This is another indication of how the concepts relating to the redemption of Israel from slavery in Egypt are applied in various ways to Israel, not least in using that redemption as the motive for particular actions on the part of God's people.

Rejection of the woman could not lead to selling her to foreigners, while selection of her for his son meant that she then had the rights of a daughter (v. 8). In a situation in which the son married another woman, she would not suffer deprivation, retaining three things in particular. The first two, 'meat' (food) and 'clothing', are clear, but the third word is uncertain.

It is a hapax legomenon (a word used only once in the Bible), and various translational possibilities have been proposed – 'marital rights', 'dwelling', 'ointment'. Another alternative is to take the reference to 'three' to refer back to the three scenarios that have been described in the preceding verses, and to take the expression here as being a comprehensive term following the words 'food' and 'clothing', 'and [that is], her upkeep'.

The laws regarding slaves conclude with the provision that if the 'purchaser' of the woman does not do 'these three [things]' she can go free without any payment of money. The understanding of 'these three' depends upon the interpretation of the previous verse. The traditional view would be that they refer to 'food', 'clothing' and 'marital rights'.

If the alternative view is adopted, then 'these three' refers back to the three possible scenarios described above. On either interpretation, the woman is to be released from any further bond, and without any exchange of money ('without compensation, no silver') she goes out from the relationship.

Our study will continue with Exodus 21.12–32.