

The *End* of the Law

Exodus 20:1-4, 7-9, 12-20

Psalm 19

Philippians 3:4b-14

Friends, in the midst of all that is going on around us, let us join in the traditional greeting when Christians gather: May the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you (and also with you).

Let us pray,

Speak O Lord to us this day, as you did that day so long ago to the Israelites from Mount Sinai. And when we attend to what you say, may we respond not only in deep respect, but in gratitude. Amen

In the series of lectionary readings we have been following the last few weeks in Exodus, we come today to that central moment in the book when God “lays down the law” for the Israelites. I must confess, I cannot read this passage without the vision coming to my head of a picture I once saw in a textbook on the psychology of religion. A Sunday-school teacher had read today’s Exodus text to her class of elementary-age students, and asked them to draw a picture of what it looked like when God gave the law. One of the girls in the class drew a tall mountain with a big stick-person God on top (with a long beard), and several small stick-people at the bottom. God was shouting ‘No, No!’, and they were all cowering.

Obviously this young girl was equating God “laying down the law” with the way she had experienced having the law “laid down” at home! And my guess is that many of us are prone to do the same. After all, does not the text end with the people quivering in fear, and Moses saying that God was trying to instill proper fear, so that they wouldn’t sin?

It does indeed. But friends, I want to suggest that we need to be careful, lest the selectivity of which passages get placed in the lectionary blind us to broader truths that God was trying to convey to the Israelites and to us. As I will come back to say, there is a place for healthy respect (or fear) of God and the law, but to focus on that alone (and first!) is all too likely to spawn the suspicion that “might makes right,” that the “law” is simply arbitrary, expressing the wishes of those in power and intended only to preserve their power. It is precisely such distortions of law

that underlay much of the turmoil in the streets of our cities today.

But where can we turn to find a more adequate, a more biblical, understanding of the law. Well, a good place to start is one chapter earlier in Exodus, where the story of God giving the law from Mount Sinai actually begins (and a text that time constraints unfortunately led those who made the lectionary reading list to omit).

Exodus 19 opens with a brief description of the Israelites arriving at Mount Sinai and camping at the bottom of the mountain. Then, starting with verse 3 we read:

3. Then Moses went up to God. The Lord called to him from the mountain, saying, “Thus you shall say to the house of Jacob, and tell the Israelites:
4. ‘You have seen what I did to the Egyptians, and how I bore you on eagles’ wings and brought you to myself. 5. Now, therefore, if you obey my voice and keep my covenant, you shall be my treasured possession out of all the peoples. Indeed the whole earth is mine, 6. but you shall be for me a priestly kingdom and a holy nation.’”

In these three verses God distills the purpose of the law. The remainder of the chapter describes Moses going up and down the mountain, speaking to God for the people; and to the people for God; as they prepare to receive the law as distilled in the ten commandments.

Consider with me for a few minutes what these verses suggest about the deepest reasons for God’s bestowing the law.

God begins: “You have seen what I did to the Egyptians.” This might be taken as a reminder of God’s power/might, that justifies God laying down the law; but for the Israelites this would not be the primary focus; what they had “seen” was God deliver them from the Egyptians, their oppressors. Thus this was more an reminder of God’s gracious acts – likely to evoke gratitude.

God continues: “And how I bore you on eagles’ wings and brought you to myself.” Here attention moves from the initial act of deliverance to what God has been doing since then, bringing them to the mountain. It may only emphasize the speed with which God helped them move, but most readers of this text who know the culture of the Middle East stress that a notion of the mother eagle is also in view, hovering protectively over and feeding her

young; evoking of how God has cared for and fed them on their journey. Here clearly there is no appeal to fear, it is all a summary of grace.

God continues: “*Now*, therefore, if you obey my voice and keep my covenant, you shall be my treasured possession out of all the peoples.” At least two things need to be underlined in this sentence. The first is that the call to keep the covenant is coming only *after* God’s gracious deliverance, and God’s *reminder* of that deliverance. While Christians have unfortunately sometimes viewed the God of the OT as a God of law; in contrast to grace in the NT; this is simply untrue! The God we find throughout the Bible is a God of grace and covenant faithfulness. Any proper understanding of the law should see it as a response to that grace, not the precondition of God’s acceptance. The second thing to underline is that response to God’s call for obedience is *not* the condition for being among God’s peoples. All humans, indeed all creation, is God’s. Our response to God is not to earn this status, but to respond in love, to God’s love, in a way that mysteriously deepens even that infinite love – “my most loved or cherished possession”.

And finally, after reminding them that the whole earth is God’s. God promises that those who hear God’s call and embrace God’s ways will “be for God a priestly kingdom and a holy nation.” The Hebrew term is actually “a kingdom of priests”; that is, not just a community that has some priests but one made up of priests. But what does that mean? I hasten to stress that what it does NOT mean is that only those who are ordained are fully God’s! The Hebrew word translated “priest” appears frequently in this chapter of Exodus, to describe Moses as he moves up and down the mountain — representing God to the people, and the people to God. That is what a priest is, at its best; someone who embodies God enough to be a reflection of God in the world, and someone who carries the concerns of the world to God. God is promising the Israelites that if they will embrace God’s law, enough to reflect God’s holiness, God will make them such a people in the world.

So let’s stand back now and ask the question, based on what God said at the *beginning* of giving the law at Sinai: Why should we keep God’s law [or any law]? What is the true purpose, or “end” of God’s law? Surely the first thing that must be said is that keeping the law (in a true biblical sense) is not to be motivated first and foremost out of fear, but out of gratitude; in response to all that God has already graciously provided us.

If there is a proper place for fear, I would suggest it too is grounded in recognition of how God has cared for us. As the Israelites reflected not only on how God had delivered them from the Egyptians, but also how God had cared for them in the wilderness, surely they began to sense that God had proven to have their best interests in mind. So if this God, the one who cares for us and desires only good for us, urges us to live by certain guidelines, these must not be arbitrary, or imposed as a way to take away our freedom. They must instead be what is in our best interest! As the psalm assigned for today (Ps. 19:7–9) puts it, the law of the LORD revives the soul, instructs the beginner, rejoices the heart, and embodies true righteousness. It is for this reason that, as the psalmist say in v. 9: ‘the fear of the LORD is pure.’ It is a respect for one who invites us to live in the ways that make for life.

If that were not enough, in Exodus 19 God goes on to stress how our loving response in embracing God’s life-giving ways rebounds by rejoicing God’s heart.

And finally, not only are we blessed, and God blessed, but if we live in God’s ways, and thereby “resemble” God in some degree, God invites and promises to enable us to be God’s reflected presence in the world.

Put differently, as we come to understand the true nature of law as gift, we will join Paul in rejoicing that our righteousness is not found in ourselves but in God reflected through us, all by the power of the Spirit that raised Christ from the dead. And like Paul, ever conscious that we do not yet fully reflect the love of God and neighbor embodied in the ten commandments, we will continue to open ourselves to further renewal in God’s loving ways.

People committed to this journey are what our world so desperately needs! May we, like the Israelites of old, accept that vocation! In the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.