

Blazing Grace

(The Graciousness of God in the Sinaitic Covenant)

By Richard M. Davidson

Introduction

I'm a lover of mountains! Even though I live in Berrien Springs, MI, a 1000 miles from the first real mountain, I grew up exploring the High Sierra Mountain Range in California, and every summer still make a trek to the high country of the Colorado Rockies to summit one or more of the 54 peaks in that state over 14,000 feet (affectionately termed "14rs"!). I'll probably never tackle the tallest peaks in the world, that require special rope climbing techniques and oxygen tanks, but I love to get above timberline into the alpine meadows where such dazzling, remote beauty greets the mountaineer's eye.

But my favorite mountain is not in the High Sierras or the Colorado Rockies. It is not a "14r." It's only some 7497 ft. But theologically it towers above all the rest in the Old Testament: Jebel Musa—the Mountain of Moses.

I've been drawn back to that mountain again and again on various jaunts to the Middle East. Once on a strenuous twilight-to-dark climb up the Abbas Pasha Camel Path, and then up the last of the some 2,500 rock-hewn steps to the summit, and a freezing night camping on the top. Once a climb in the full light of day, feeling the intense heat of desert sun shimmering off the granite cliffs. A couple of times arising at 2 A.M., and summiting just in time to see the most awesome sunrise anywhere in the world, in my opinion, as the seemingly endless horizon layers of granite peaks in the Sinai Peninsula are transformed from black silhouettes to ever brighter shades of grey, and finally to a fiery orange before the rising sun. .

Several times I've taken an early morning trek down from the main summit of Jebel Musa to Ras elSafsaf, a triple-peaked shoulder of Jebel Musa that extends over a mile (km) to the northwest. It is this 2000 6542 ft. high mountain (2000 m.) and not Jebel Musa itself, that is visible from the vast plain below, er-Rahah. I am convinced that Ras elSafsaf is the probable peak that blazed with God's glory and from the top of which God spoke the Law to Israel.

Few people climb Ras elSafsaf. My guidebook stated that the first part of the climb "is facilitated by rock-cut steps, but the ascent beyond this is for experienced climbers only."

Undeterred by the warning, on my first ascent I almost lost my life when I slipped on one of the jagged granite cliffs. Though the climb is treacherous, the spectacle from the top is worth the risk. I don't refer to the vista of range after range of gigantic granite peaks stretching off into the distance, which is incredibly beautiful in itself. Rather what really impressed me was the view that sprawls out nearly 1000 meters below to the North—the expansive plain, er Rahah, about 2 miles by 1 mile (3 ½ km by 2 km). This is the only plain of considerable size anywhere near Mount Sinai. It is the probable site of Israel's vast encampment while at Sinai.

As I stood on the top of Ras elSafsaf, the landscape changed before my imagination and I envisioned the twelve tribes of Israel camped in the plain below, and then called by God on that Spring morning of 1450 B.C. to stand at the foot of the mountain. I imagined the mountain upon which I stood ablaze with the fiery glory of Yahweh, completely engulfed in smoke ascending like a massive furnace, with deafening thunderings and blinding lightnings; the sound of the shofar blown by a heavenly being, growing louder and louder, and the whole mountain quaking greatly, till the people in the valley below trembled with fear. . Mt. Sinai, in all its forbidding ruggedness, seems to be the perfect backdrop for God's giving of the Law on this mountain some 3500 years ago.

The terrors of Sinai! The memory of those terrors so embedded themselves in the consciousness of corporate Israel that still in NT times the author of Hebrews could reminisce: (Heb 12:18-20): “For you have not come to the mountain that may be touched and that burned with fire, and to blackness and darkness and tempest, and the sound of a trumpet and the voice of words, so that those who heard it begged that the word should not be spoken to them anymore. . . And so terrifying was the sight that Moses said, ‘I am exceedingly afraid and trembling’ [Deut 9:19].”

The terrors of Sinai are still embedded in our corporate consciousness as spiritual Israel. How many times have I heard preachers, yes, Adventists as well as non-Adventists, contrast the stern, terrifying Lawgiver of Sinai with the gentle, gracious Saviour of Calvary. How many times have I preached those opposing sentiments myself, presenting the One Who uncharacteristically raised His voice at Sinai so He could get the attention of the rabble of freed slaves below, but much preferred speaking with His characteristic soft, gracious tones in the

Sermon on The Mount of Blessing!

Recently I have come to recognize that I have misjudged God's actions on Sinai. God was not out of character thundering His "fiery law" from Mount Sinai. The Majestic God of infinite holiness and power is fully in character amid the pyrotechnic display on the rugged mountaintop. This is not a show, but the way God really is! Hear the testimony of Moses himself, and cited again by the author of Hebrews: "Our God is a consuming fire." (Deut 4:24; Heb 12:29) God on Sinai is not just a gentle teacher raising His voice in an unruly classroom to get the students' attention, as I used to picture it. This display of awesome glory is part of the very being of the Holy One of Israel. In fact, the dazzling display of glory on the mountain was actually a hiding of God's glory; were He to appear in His fully-unveiled glory unmasked by the clouds covering Sinai, all creatures in His presence would no doubt have been consumed.

If the awesome spectacle of Sinai is only a faint revelation of the very being of the holy God who dwells in unapproachable light, then at first glance Sinai seems the very last place in Scripture to seek a portrait of a gracious God. But recent study has convinced me otherwise!

When I began researching for this sermon (paper), I was surprised to find to find out that there are NO references in the NT that refer to God or Christ as "gracious" (at least in the various modern English versions I checked.) Moreover, there are only FOUR times in all of the Hebrew and Greek Scriptures where God calls Himself "gracious" [Heb *hanun*]-and they are ALL spoken from Mt. Sinai (Exod 22:27; 33:19; 34:6)! If Calvary is the mountain of "Amazing Grace", Sinai is the mountain of "Blazing Grace!"

In the next few minutes (pages), I invite you to behold the amazing "blazing grace" of God at Sinai. See amazing portrait of God the Gracious Master Teacher emerge from the Sinai narrative. When doing a narrative study, we cannot abstractly systematize the theological truths from a string of proof-texts. We have to allow the theology of the covenant and God's graciousness to gradually emerge from a close reading of the narrative.

The Gracious National Covenant

We first see the graciousness of God as a Master Teacher in His making of the covenant at Sinai. Many have described the Sinaitic covenant as a covenant of works in contrast to the

covenant of grace ratified at Calvary. But behold the Gracious Covenant Maker and the Covenant of Grace on Sinai!

Listen to His opening statement to Moses on the Mountain: (vs. 3-4): “Thus you shall say to the house of Jacob, and tell the children of Israel: ‘You [plural] have seen what I did to the Egyptians, and how I bore you on eagle’s wings and brought you [plural] to Myself.’” God here is following the basic format of international treaties of the time made by an overlord or suzerain with his vassal subjects. After introducing Himself in a preamble, the Suzerain sets forth in a historical prologue a description of the previous relationship between the two parties, stressing the benevolence and generosity, the graciousness, of the suzerain in the past, as a basis for the vassal’s gratitude and future obedience.

Here in Exod 19:4 Yahweh describes in the most intimate way His care for Israel. Like an eagle, noted for its devotion to its young, who bears the young eagles on its wings to the lofty heights as they learn to fly, swooping down to catch them on its back if they are still too experienced to soar properly (see Deut 32:11), so God had borne them on “eagle’s wings” and brought them to Himself.

The first 18 chapters of Exodus are all about these mighty acts of redemption on the part of God. Only on the basis of this present reality of redemption did God call for a response of heartfelt gratitude on the part of His people in Exod 19: “If you [all] will now listen to my voice, and keep (literally “guard or treasure” Heb. *shamar*) my covenant, then you [all] shall be a special treasure to Me above all people; for all the earth is Mine. And you [all] shall be to Me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.” (Vv. 5-6)

Note the emphasis upon the spontaneous response of gratitude to God’s grace! Gracious redemption precedes a call to covenant faithfulness.

Note also the promised blessings, with emphasis upon the word “to be”: “You shall BE a special treasure;” “You shall Be a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.” God the Suzerain is entering into a covenant on a national level, conferring a privileged national status to His people. He is incorporating His people as a religio-political theocracy under the direct government of the Sovereign Suzerain of the earth. They were called to accept God as their Ruler, their deliverer from temporal bondage in Egypt. (Cf. PP 303, 311) This kind of international, political treaty

they could well understand, for it was the common form of treaty-making at this time in history, as evidenced by the Hittite treaties from this period discovered this last century.

I wonder if God may have even providentially overseen the development of treaty-making structures in world history so that a political model would be available that would parallel the essential features of the covenant relationship He desired to have with His people. Only in this time of ancient history, the last part of the second millennium BC did such covenant format exist in the ancient Near East, with an introductory historical prologue highlighting the gracious acts of the suzerain as the basis of heartfelt grateful obedience on the part of the vassal. Only in this period of ancient Near Eastern history was there the list of blessings in the covenant that the Suzerain promised to the vassal as they stayed in covenant relationship. Only in this period was their tender language of intimacy in the international treaties, such as we find here on the part of God. The later, Assyrian treaties, had no historical prologue; it was a rule of fear and intimidation; there was no motivation of grace. There were no blessings in the Assyrian treaties; only curses for disobedience; there were no words of intimate relationship, such as we find in the Hittite treaties of the time of Moses.

God's Gracious Invitation to Intimacy

Let's look more deeply at this account in Exod 19, and see even more evidence of the graciousness of God, in His invitation to covenant intimacy. In v. 3 He had said to Israel: "I bore you on eagle's wings and brought you to Myself." Indeed they were camped in the plain before Mt Sinai (according to v. 2). But how intimate did God really want to be with Israel? Judging from a surface reading of the latter part of this 19th chapter of Exodus, God places Israel at a long arm's distance from Himself. Here He had said "I brought you to Myself," but almost in the next breath (v. 13) God tells Moses, "You shall set bounds for the people all around, saying, 'Take heed to yourselves that you do not go up to the mountain or touch its base. Whoever touches the mountain shall surely be put to death.'"

"I brought you to Myself" but "Do not come close on pain of death!" That seeming paradox had always puzzled me. I resolved the apparent problem by considering that God's holiness was just too awesome to allow the people to come close or they could not bear the sight,

even after 3 day process of consecration. But that didn't really jibe with the later account of the 70 elders coming up on the mountain and seeing God (Exod 24).

Imagine my joyous surprise when I read this passage in Hebrew not long ago, and discovered that the modern translations have added one crucial word not found in the Hebrew text of v. 12 and thereby have totally reversed the original meaning! It was actually an evangelical scholar John Sailhamer in his commentary on Genesis that alerted me to this astounding near-universal misrepresentation of the text! Vs. 12 in most modern versions reads: "Take heed to yourselves that you do NOT go up to the mountain or touch its base. But the word NOT is not in the Hebrew! It literally reads: Take heed to yourselves when you GO UP to the Mountain and touch its base!" Indeed the warning follows about not touching or coming near the mountain (v. 12b, 13a), but this is BEFORE the signal trumpet sounds. V. 13 b specifically states: "When the trumpet sounds long, they SHALL . . . [what?] —one version says, they shall "gather at the foot of the mountain" (NLT); another (NKJ) "they shall come near the mountain"; most "they shall come up to the mountain" (implying to coming close to the mountain but not ON the mountain.) Only the NRS translates the Hebrew precisely here: "They may GO UP ON THE MOUNTAIN!" The Hebrew is unambiguous here, when the time for the divine appointment with their Suzerain came, the Gracious God was inviting ALL of the people to come up close to Him ON the mountain! The One who had "brought them to Himself" was inviting them to even greater intimacy with Himself, to come as close as humanly possible in their sinful human natures and survive in the presence of an infinitely holy God. Behold God's Blazing grace!

Unfortunately, as we noted in our introduction, the people responded in fear to the Lord's mighty display of His holiness, and as Moses later reminded the people in His farewell sermon (Deuteronomy 5:5): "I stood between the Lord and you at that time, to declare to you the word of the Lord; for you were afraid because of the fire, and you did not go up on the mountain." God's graciousness is also revealed here; the people were too terrified to come up on the mountain with God, so He condescends to speak to them from the cloud His Ten Words.

God the Gracious Covenant Lawgiver

Here in Exodus 20 we find a powerful portrait of God the Gracious Lawgiver. From Mt. Sinai God sets forth in greater detail the stipulations of the Covenant. It is in the context of God's prior redemptive grace that we must understand the giving of the Decalogue on Mt. Sinai. The immediate context of the Ten Commandments makes clear that they do not belong to a legalistic system opposed to saving grace. We too frequently teach our children the Ten Commandments, beginning with vs. 3, "Thou shalt have no other gods before Me." But the introduction in verses 1 and 2 is crucial: "And God spoke all these words: 'I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery.'"

In this historical prologue to the Decalogue, God says He has already redeemed His people. They have already been saved. The law is not for Israel to keep in order to be saved, but for those who are already saved by grace!. It is not a legalistic code of requirements to be fulfilled so that God will accept them. Rather it is a statement of an intimate covenant relationship between God and His people, a description of the abundant life for Israel in fellowship with their Redeemer.

In fact, in the setting of Exod 20:2, the Decalogue is nothing less than a tenfold promise of life in a covenant relationship with the God of creation and redemption. I long wondered how Ellen White could write (1 BC 1105): "The Ten Commandments . . . are ten promises. . . . There is not a negative in that law, although it may appear thus." I always understood this in the sense that "all God's biddings are enablings." But recently, I've noted that there is more! This promissory aspect of the Decalogue is embedded in the very grammatical structure of the Ten Commandments. While it is possible to translate the commandments as prohibitions, the same grammatical structure of each commandment may be translated as an intensive promise. For you Hebrew buffs, the lo plus the imperfect of the commandments 1-3 and 6-10 can either be translated as negative prohibitions or as emphatic promises. "Thou shalt have no other gods before me"; or "I promise you, 'You will not want to have any other gods before Me.'" Likewise, the 4th and 5th commandments are not given in the expected imperative, but in the infinitive absolute, which again can be translated as intensive command, or emphatic promise. (Gesenius, Par. 113bb, 113ee.) "Remember the Sabbath; honor thy father and mother;" or "I promise you, you will remember; you will honor." . Of course, the Decalogue can become a legalistic code for

those who think that by observing the commandments they can earn favor with God. But here is warm, gracious, covenant-promise love, not cold legalistic prohibition, for those who accept the historical prologue of prior redemption. Throughout the remainder of God's instructions to Moses at Sinai, and again in Moses' farewell speech to Israel on the borders of the Promised Land, the pattern is always the same. First comes the mention of redemption, then law. "I have redeemed you," He says, "therefore keep My laws." (See Deut 7:7,11; 10:20-22; 11:1,7,8.)

I Am Gracious!

Following the giving of the Decalogue, God gave Moses more detailed judgments or practical applications of the Decalogue (Exod 21-13). Here is another step in the condescension of a gracious God. The people, who were too frightened to go up on the mountain, were now too frightened to hear more of God's words from the Voice of God Himself. When God's voice resounded amid the thunderings, the lightning flashes, the sound of the trumpet, and the smoking mountain, Scripture (Exod 20:18-19) records that the people "trembled and stood afar off. Then they said to Moses, 'You speak with us, and we will hear; but let not God speak with us, lest we die.'" And this gracious holy God, condescends to meet the people in their fear; He gives the rest of the divine judgments to Moses, and tells Moses to relate His words to the people (v. 22).

Did you ever notice the verse tucked away in these judgments about the graciousness of God? Exod 22:26-27: "If you ever take your neighbor's garment as a pledge, you shall return it to him before the sun goes down. For that is his only covering, it is his garment for his skin. What will he sleep in? And it will be that when he cries to Me, I will hear, for I AM Gracious!!" I am gracious. As far as I am aware, in all of Scripture God says "I am. . ." followed by only two character qualities. He doesn't say "I am good." "I am righteous." Only two qualities: Several times He says "I am holy." And here, "I am gracious."! Sinai indeed reveals God's dazzling holiness, and also His unfailing graciousness. Blazing grace!

The Covenant of Grace

After giving the judgments, in Exod 24 we read that God ratified the covenant with sacrifices—burnt offerings and peace offerings. This chapter focuses upon the covenant making service based upon the blood of the sacrifice, and with the addition of this chapter we have seen all the elements of the valid covenant of grace. It was based upon an experience and statement of prior redemption preceding the Ten Words, and upon the blood of the sacrifice which ratified the covenant, pointing to the atoning work of their Substitute and Surety. The covenant on Mt. Sinai, on God’s part, was totally a covenant of grace, a phase of the one everlasting covenant presented throughout the Bible. That’s why Ellen White could write: “The covenant that God made with His people at Sinai is to be our refuge and defense. . . . This covenant is of just as much force today as it was when the Lord made it with ancient Israel.” (IBC 1103; SW Mar 1, 1904)

We were There!

Have you put yourself into the story of the Sinaitic covenant? Ellen White’s indication that the Sinaitic covenant is for us today has Scriptural precedent. Have you ever noticed the words of Moses 40 years after God made a covenant with His people at Sinai? The entire adult generation had died during the wilderness wanderings except for Caleb and Joshua, and a whole new generation had come on the scene, many of whom had never even witnessed the covenant making ceremony at Sinai. Yet hear what Moses tells the people in Deut 5:2-3: “The Lord our God made a covenant with US in Horeb. The Lord did not make this covenant with our fathers (only), but with us, those who are here today, ALL of US who are alive.” Moses asks everyone, even those not physically present, to consider that they personally had been present when God made the covenant. It was a covenant with them, as part of corporate Israel. Joshua insists on the same truth in the covenant renewal ceremony of Joshua 24 just before his death. “Your eyes saw what God did,” even though it was actually your fathers, your ancestors, who were physically present. Every succeeding generation was to consider that they were actually present when God entered into a covenant with them. That includes US, spiritual Israel! We were there at Sinai! The covenant was made with us! I invite you to personalize the graciousness of God in this covenant-making narrative!

God's Graciousness with the People's Response

As God makes His covenant with Israel (recorded in Exod 24), the people responded, as they had at the beginning (recorded in Exod 19): "All that the Lord has spoken, we will do." (Exod 19:8; 20:19; 24:3, 7.) [QUESTION:] Were these words a proper response of the people? Yes or No? Let's let God settle the issue. Hear the words of Moses reminiscing of this time: Deut 5:27 records the people's response "we will hear and do" and then in v. 28 God evaluates: "Then the Lord heard the voice of your words when you spoke to Me, and the Lord said to me: 'I have heard the voice of the words of this people, which they have spoken to you. They are RIGHT in all that they have spoken.'" Correct words! Note that Ellen White elaborates: In RH 6/23/1904 (1 BC 1103) Ellen White quotes the words of the people in Exod 19:8, "All the Lord has spoken we will do," and categorically states "This is the pledge that God's people are to make in these last days."

The WORDS were right. And God accepted the correct *words* of the people, and entered into a valid covenant with them on the national level as their Redeemer from temporal bondage and political Suzerain.

But what about the heartfelt response of gratitude and trust in God as their Redeemer from sin? God indicates that this was lacking. Longingly, God declares: (Deut 5:29) "Oh that they had such a heart in them that they would fear Me and always keep all My commandments, that it might be well with them and with their children forever." As Ellen White puts it, "Feeling that they were able to establish their own righteousness, they declared, 'All that the Lord hath said, will we do and be obedient'" (PP 372).

The people still had much to learn about the holiness of God, about the sinfulness of their own hearts, and their inability to keep the law in their own strength, and about the need for a Redeemer from Spiritual bondage. Here is the gracious God, accepting the people where they were, and leading them on gently as the Master Teacher to more complete understanding. (See the picture of this in PP 371-372)

"The people were set apart and sealed to God. A portion of the sacrificial blood was sprinkled upon the altar, signifying that "the people had consecrated themselves—body, mind, and soul—to God." Part of the blood was also sprinkled upon the people, signifying "that through the

sprinkled blood of Christ, God had graciously accepted them as His special treasure.” (1BC 1103).

On God’s part, this covenant was a valid covenant of grace—part of the everlasting covenant of God’s promised redemption, agreed to by the Father and Son even before the creation of the world, announced to Adam and Eve in the Protoevangelium of Gen 3:15, promised to Abram in Gen 12 and codified in the Abrahamic covenant of Gen 15 and 17. God accepted the people on the basis of the blood of the Lamb of God “slain from the foundation of the world.” On the human side, the people’s response contained appropriate wording, but the wrong motivation, and the wrong understanding of the basis of their salvation and ability to stay in covenant relation with God, rooted in their own efforts. On God’s part, it was a valid “new covenant” based on the divine promise and the blood of Christ, but on the people’s part it was an “old covenant” experience of salvation by works.

Intimate Table Fellowship

After the ratification of the covenant with the people, notice that once more God graciously invited close intimacy with His people. The people were too terrified to come up on the mountain, so God invites Moses, Aaron, Aaron’s sons, and the 70 elders, up on the mountain, for a fellowship meal with the Lord, in accordance with a common element in covenant making of that day to solemnize the covenant partnership. Exod 24:10: “And they saw the God of Israel. And there was under His feet as it were a paved work of sapphire stone, and it was like the very heaven in its clarity.” Sapphire is the color of God’s throne, and there are some textual clues that the leaders of Israel may have seen a glimpse of the heavenly sanctuary itself, in all its vastness and glory. Vs. 11, again repeats, “So they saw God,” and adds, “and they ate and drank.” Behold the graciousness of God, in intimate table fellowship with the leaders of Israel.”

The Graciousness of God in the Gospel Types

Then Moses went on up to the top of the mountain. There is a level place about half way up Jebel Musa, where there is now a pond and some willow trees. Here’s where I suggest the 70 elders met with God, and where Joshua stayed on for 40 days. Moses himself was called up to

the summit of Jebel Musa (“The Mountain of Moses”).

Behold the graciousness of the Master Teacher during that period of 40 days, showing Moses a miniature model of the heavenly sanctuary, and giving Him instructions for the sanctuary service, a visual display of the plan of salvation. Fifty chapters of the Torah are devoted to the sanctuary service. In the heart of Torah—law—is the Gospel in sanctuary types and shadows. Amazing “Blazing Grace”!

God’s Grace and the Golden Calf

Meanwhile, back in camp on the Plain of er-Rahah, the people become impatient waiting for Moses to return. The covenant of grace and Decalogue of ten promises can become a legalistic code for those who think that by observing the commandments they can earn favor with God, and that they can obey in their own strength. Initially this seems to have been the case with the Israelites at Mount Sinai. As Moses communed with God on the mountain, they fell into apostasy and learned by bitter experience their own sinfulness and need of a Saviour.

Only a few weeks after God had given the Ten Commandments from Sinai and entered into a national covenant with His people, the Israelites persuaded Aaron to make for them “gods” [’*ēlohîm*]¹ while Moses tarried on the mountain. The “molded calf/young bull” [’*ēgel massēkâ*, Exod 32:4] probably was not connected with the Egyptian Apis bull deity (which was worshiped as a live bull and not in image form) nor with the goddess Hathor (which was symbolized by a heifer, not a bull), but more likely was linked with the bull into which the Canaanite god Baal was thought to have transformed himself, and with which the Israelites

¹The expression ’*ēlohîm* can refer either to the appellation for God, Elohim, or it can represent the plural [pagan] “gods.” Probably connotations of both are ultimately involved in the narrative. On the one hand, Aaron specifically indicates that the feast centered on the gold calf was a “feast to the Lord” [*hag ladonai*] (v. 5). On the other hand, the use of the common plural demonstrative adjective “these” [’*ēlle*] in vv. 4 and 8 (“These are your ’*ēlohîm*”) implies pagan plural gods. Note that the intertextual references to this narrative emphasize both aspects: Neh 9:18 (with its singular *zeh*) highlights the former, while Acts 7:40 (with its plural *theous* “gods”) underscores the latter.

would have been familiar, since Baal worship was widely known in the Nile delta at that time.² It appears that the worship that Aaron instituted with the golden calf/young bull, was not an *ad hoc* celebration, but part of an already-well-established worship system. As one commentator puts it, “this is not a casual incident; it is an organized cult, with statue, altar, priest and festival.”³

The worship of the golden calf/young bull not only constituted a transgression of the second commandment; part of their idolatrous worship also involved Israel’s “breaking loose” sexually. Exod 32:6b describes the experience of their idol worship: “the people sat down to eat and rose up to play [*lēšahēq*]. The Hebrew term *sāḥaq* “laugh, sport, play” probably here has sexual implications and signifies “drunken, immoral orgies and sexual play.”⁴ As John Davis observes, “The verb translated ‘to play’ suggests illicit and immoral sexual activity which normally accompanied fertility rites found among the Canaanites who worshipped [sic] the god Baal.”⁵

God informed Moses of the situation that was transpiring on the plain below Mt. Sinai (Exod 32:7): “your people whom you brought out of the land of Egypt have become corrupt [*šihēt*, intensive Piel of *šāḥat*].” The verb *šāḥat* is the same verb used to describe the corruption of the earth in Noah’s day (Gen 6:12), a situation which involved (among other things) sexual

²Cole, 214. Cole cites the Ras Shamra cyle, Baal I. v. 18, where Baal’s transformation into a bull is described. The traditional gods of Egypt—including the Apis bull and Hathor—which had just recently been discredited in the ten plagues, would not likely be the gods to which Israel would so soon turn. On the worship of Baal and his consorts in Egypt, even by Egyptians, at the time of the New Kingdom, note the summary of Edward F. Wente, “Egyptian Religion,” *ABD* 2:410: “Asiatic deities, such as Astarte, Baal, Rešep, and Anat, were accepted in Egypt in the course of the New Kingdom. . . . In Egypt, Asiatic deities were worshiped by Egyptians in accordance with Egyptian cult practices.”

³Cole, 215.

⁴Walter C. Kaiser, Jr., “Exodus,” *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary*, vol. 2, ed. Frank E. Gaebelein (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1990), 478. Cf. Gen 26:8; 39:14, 17.

⁵John J. Davis, *Moses and the Gods of Egypt: Studies in the Book of Exodus* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1971), 285. Cf. BDB, 850, which points out the nuance of “conjugal caresses” in this verb.

corruption. The nature of the corruption at Sinai is further elaborated when Moses poetically responds to Joshua's suggestion that it is the sound of war they hear (Exod 32:18): "It is not the voice of those who shout in victory, / Nor is it the voice of those who cry out in defeat, / But the voice of those who sing [*'ănnôt*] that I hear." John Durham points out how the poem describes three different kinds of singing, and the kind Moses hears, described by the intensive Piel infinitive construct, denotes "'random singing,' the disorganized, haphazard singing of a wild debauch."⁶ Ariella Deem arrives at a similar translation but from a different angle: she suggests that the word *'ănnôt* is the intensive form of a newly-discovered Hebrew verb meaning "to make love," and thus in this verse should be translated "the sound of an *orgy* that I hear."⁷ Deem and others also point out the allusion here to the goddess Anath—the Canaanite goddess of love and war. Robert M. Good makes clear the implication of this association with Anath—"The ability of Moses' words to multiply meanings has become a mechanism for simultaneously characterizing Israel's apostasy as pagan and implying that it involved sexual license."⁸

Moses' audial assessment on Mt. Sinai is confirmed as he and Joshua near the camp and see the statue of the young bull and the "dancing" (*mēḥōlōt*) of the idolatrous worship (v. 19). The plural of *mēḥōlā* "probably implies a religious ceremony, with devotees whirling ecstatically before the idol and altar."⁹ In the context of the bull-cult being worshiped, this dancing probably had "an orgiastic undertone."¹⁰ The narrator further comments on what Moses witnessed (v. 25): the people had "broken loose, cast off all restraints" (*pārā*)—a verb which has the idea of

⁶John I. Durham, *Exodus*, Word Biblical Commentary, vol 3 (Waco, TX: Word Books, 1987), 425.

⁷Ariella Deem, "The Goddess Anath and Some Biblical Hebrew Cruces," *JSS* 23 (1978): 25-30.

⁸Robert M. Good, "Exodus 32:18," in *Love and Death in the Ancient Near East: Essays in Honor of Marvin H. Pope*, ed. John H. Marks and Robert M. Good (Guilford, CT: Four Quarters Publishing Co., 1987), 141.

⁹Cole, 218.

¹⁰*Ibid.*

“loosening” or “uncovering”, i.e., nakedness.¹¹ Most likely this verb *pārā* is used “to invite comparison with the Baal Pe‘or traditions (Num 25:1ff.) The narrator of the Exodus story has subtly indicated that the offense at the foot of Sinai was sexual and he has virtually embedded the name Pe‘or within his narrative.”¹² “It would appear that there was a type of religious prostitution connected with the people’s worship of the golden calf.”¹³ The sexual orgies involved in the idolatrous worship were thus not just sensual indulgence. “These, in a Baalized context, would have a religious, not an immoral significance to the worshiper.”¹⁴ In other words, sex was sacralized and even divinized as part of the cultic ritual. God’s decided punishment of this “breaking loose” reveals His violent rejection of a distorted theology and praxis that incorporates human sexual activity into religious ritual.

God’s revulsion of such apostasy is understandably intense, but note that before executing judgment, God in His grace gives an opportunity for repentance, and only those who stubbornly persisted in their rebellion even after the gracious invitation to repent, are cut off in judgment. The people at large realize the enormity of their guilt, and Moses, a type of Christ our High Priest, reveals once again the gracious heart of God as his intercession illustrates the mediation of Christ for sinful men. Moses is willing to forfeit his own eternal life if the people’s lives might be spared. What Moses was willing to do, to bear the guilt of the transgressor, the antitypical Moses, actually did—in our behalf! What amazing grace!

God’s amazing graciousness is not only revealed in His willingness to forgive the penitent sinners in Israel. What is most astounding to me is that the ringleader in the apostasy, the leader responsible for making the golden calf—Aaron, thoroughly repentant, is given the honor of being high priest, and coming directly into the presence of God in the Holy of Holies every year! That’s God graciousness!

¹¹BDB, 828. Cf. Davis, 285.

¹²Good, “Exodus 32:18,” 141.

¹³Kaiser, “Exodus,” 480.

¹⁴Cole, 216.

But back to Moses. He had interceded in behalf of the people. In answer to his intercession, God promised to restore favor to His people, and to continue to direct their journeys to Canaan with the token of His Presence. But Moses “thirsted for greater tokens of God’s favor. He now made a request that no human being had ever made before: ‘Please, Lord, show me Your glory.’” (Cf. PP 327-328). Moses had just recently communed with God “face to face, as a man speaks to a friend” in the mountain for 40 days, but God’s form itself was obscured by a cloud.” I sense just a hint of Moses’ feeling when I reach out and try to communicate with my Beloved via the pay phones of Australia. I can hear Jo Ann’s voice, but I want to see her face!

Moses dares to plead for that ultimate divine-human intimacy with a gracious God. And God replies, And Ellen White records in PP 328, “God did not rebuke his request as presumptuous; but the gracious words were spoken, ‘I will make My goodness pass before thee.’ [notice–“gracious words”]. The unveiled glory of God, no man in this mortal state can look upon and live; but Moses was assured that he should behold as much of the divine glory as he could endure.”

Hear Ellen White’s poignant description of this intimate encounter: “Again he was summoned to the mountain summit; then the hand that made the world, that hand that ‘removeth the mountains and they know not’ (Job 9:5), took this creature of the dust, this mighty man of faith, and placed him in a cleft of the rock, while the glory of God and all His goodness passed before Him.” (PP 328)

My favorite place on Jebel Musa is a small cave—a cleft in the granite rocks, at the summit—there’s only one, which I envision as the one where Moses was hid while the glory of God passed by. What was His glory? Yes, the dazzling brightness, so that only God’s back could be seen by Moses, not His face. But deeper, it was the glory of His character. Moses asked, May I see your glory? And God replied, Yes, I will make all My Goodness pass before you, and I will proclaim the name [the character] of the Lord before you.” (Vs. 19)

Early the next morning Moses came up Mount Sinai with two newly cut tablets of stone. This, by the way, was the SEVENTH time Moses has ascended Mt Sinai in the space of a few weeks. “Then the Lord descended in the cloud and stood with him there [stood with him!—do you see the intimacy of this gracious God!] and proclaimed the name of the Lord.” (V. 5) Hear

the Deity proclaim His glory: “Yahweh, Yahweh, the merciful and gracious God, [*hanun*, there’s are key word for this sermon], slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast unfailing love and truth, keeping mercy for thousands, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin, by no means leaving sin unpunished (NLT), visiting the iniquity of the fathers upon the children and the children’s children to the third and the fourth generation.” (V. 6-7).

Did you hear His name, His character? Yahweh, Yahweh—twice He repeats His personal covenant—He is the self-existent One, the One who comes down to be with His creatures, the One Who IS, who WAS and who Will BE with us, the One who CAUSES to BE, has everything in control—all of that is implicit in the Divine Name Yahweh.

Merciful—*rahum*—this is related to the word for “womb”; it describes the God of “womb-like love.” The womb is the safest place in the world for the fetus, protected from all outside dangers. God is the giver of just such merciful, “womb-love” for his creatures.

Gracious—*hanun*—the key word for this sermon; from the verb *hanan*, to be “full of mercy, grace, and favor” —it is the word from which the name Hannah comes, and by the way, the modern name “Jo Ann” —my wife is named gracious!

“Slow to anger”—literally “long of nose!” God’s anger fuse is very long! incredible patience

“Abounding in *hesed*—this is the covenant term par excellence; *hesed* is steadfast covenant love: it is best summarized in that hymn: “O love that will not let me Go!” That’s God’s *hesed*.

“Abounding in *emet*— this implies stability, reliability, faithfulness, trustworthiness, sureness, truth.

“Keeping *hesed* for thousands—here he returns to the ultimate covenant word, God’s lovingkindness, his covenant love, is steadfast unto thousands—and not just 1000s, but what is implied here in the Hebrew is the thousandth generation! God’s *hesed* is to the 1000th generation! (NRS; TNK).

“Forgiving iniquity, transgression and sin”—all kinds of sin! Even *awon* (perverse iniquity), and *pesha* ‘ (rebellion—there is no sacrifice in the sanctuary service for this kind of sin); but God can forgive even the worst and apparently most hopeless sinner!

And at the same time He is a God of justice—“not leaving sin unpunished.” Scars remain upon the sinner, and even may affect one’s posterity for several generations. But as other Scripture testifies, He bears the ultimate punishment for sin Himself, and only those who refuse to accept this divine Gift bear their own guilt. The few generations of visiting the iniquity are swallowed up in the 1000s of generations of divine mercy. Behold God’s Blazing Grace! With Moses, we make haste, and bow our head toward the earth, and worship! (V. 8)

The Sanctuary-Focused Decalogue of Grace

Most studies I have read of the Sinaitic covenant focus upon Exod 19-24 in its initial formulation; a few pause to view the revelation of God’s glory in Exod 34:1-8. But Exod 19-24 is not the end of the story. In v. 9 again Moses pleads for pardon for stiff-necked Israel; note how he includes himself: “*We* are a stiff-necked people; pardon *our* iniquity and *our* sin; and take *us* as your inheritance.” He identifies himself with the sins of the people.

Now notice how the Sinaitic covenant is repeated, but on a deeper, spiritual level. In Exod 19 the covenant was made on the national level of, emphasizing Israel’s status: “You will be . . . a holy nation, a kingdom of priests.” But here in Exod 34 the total emphasis is upon the work of God. (V. 10): “Behold, *I make* a covenant. Before all your people *I will do* marvels such as have not been done in all the earth, nor in any nation; and all the people among whom you are shall see the *work of the Lord*. For it is an awesome thing that *I will do* with you.” The emphasis is not “You will be” but “I will do.”

Then comes a surprise! God gives what many scholars have recognized as a Second Decalogue. These take the same format as the Ten Words in Exod 20. The four commands of the first table are repeated—no other gods before Yahweh (v. 14), no graven images (v. 17), and resting on the seventh day (v. 21). Reference for God’s name is deepened and made more intimate: God’s name is given as “Jealous,” using the language of a Lover jealous for marital faithfulness of His spouse. Thus the covenant is placed in the setting of an intimate and exclusive marriage relationship between God and His people.

The other six commandments are cultic in nature, i.e., they focus upon the sanctuary

sacrificial system and festivals and offerings: [(5) Unleavened bread (v. 18); (6) Firstborn belong to God, redeemed (v. 19-20); (7) (three yearly festivals (vv. 22-24); (8) Not leave Passover sacrifice till morning (v. 25); (9) Bring firstfruits of land to the Lord (v. 26a); and (10) Do not follow Canaanite ritual practice of boiling a kid in its mother's milk (v. 26b).]

Here at the sanctuary is where a gracious God comes down to dwell, to live, with His spouse, and He makes provision for the spiritual needs of His people through the services of the sanctuary.

Now let's sort out vv. 27-28. At the conclusion of this "sanctuary-centered Decalogue," God tells Moses, "Write these words [what words? The sanctuary centered decalogue], for according to the tenor of these words [what words? Sanctuary-centered decalogue] I have made a covenant with you and with Israel. (v. 27). "So he [Moses] there with the Lord 40 days and 40 nights; he neither ate bread nor drank water. And He wrote on the tablets the words of the covenant, the Ten Commandments [which words, which 10 commandments?]." From the statement alone, one would assume that it was the sanctuary-centered decalogue. But compare Deut 10:2-4, where Moses indicates that God wrote on the second tablets of stone the same Ten Words that He were on the first tablets, the words which He spoke to all Israel in the mountain from the midst of the fire in the day of the assembly." So note it well: the words of the Covenant in Exod 34 were those of the first Decalogue, but God makes renewed covenant in accordance with the tenor of the sanctuary-centered Decalogue. Obedience to the original Decalogue is now rooted in the love relationship between God and Israel and the provisions of the sanctuary. Law and gospel blend in the very basis of this renewed covenant! Behold God's blazing grace!

Blazing indeed. When Moses came down the mountain from speaking with God, he did not know that the skin of His face shone while He talked with God. What glorious message received in the presence of God had caused His face to shine? As we have seen, the message was both the Law and Gospel. As Ellen White puts it, "it was the heavenly light streaming from Calvary, no less than the glory of the law of God, that shed a radiance upon the face of Moses" (PP 330). Moses' face shone so brightly that the Israelites, including Aaron were at first afraid to come close. But finally Moses persuaded them to return to him, first the leaders, and finally the congregation, and he shared with them "all that the Lord had spoken with him on Mount Sinai" (v. 32). All, including the description of God's gracious character (vv. 6-8), his plea for

pardon of sin for Israel (v. 9), the covenant of grace based upon God's mighty acts and not the people's performance (v. 10), the sacrificial system and plan of salvation emphasized in the sanctuary-centered cultic decalogue (vv. 14-26), providing forgiveness and power to keep the ethical Decalogue (34:1, 28; Deut 5:1-22).

The Master Teacher has led them to see their sinfulness in contrast to His gracious character; He has led them to realize their need of a Saviour, and the glorious plan of salvation. The people of Israel joyfully accepted the blessings of God's covenant of grace—the everlasting covenant based upon divine promises. They are now bound by faith and love to God as their Deliverer from the bondage of sin. (PP 372).

And what was their response? There is nothing recorded now of a vow of obedience: “All that the Lord has said we will do.” The focus is not on what we will do. The focus is on the sanctuary and what God has done and will do. In Exod 35 Moses tells the people about the building of the sanctuary and invites any who have a “willing heart” (v. 5) to bring materials and talents for the work. And the response was incredible: The people's hearts were stirred (v. 21) and they gave with a “willing spirit” (v. 21) and “a willing heart” (v. 22, 29). And you know the rest of the story: “and they spoke to Moses, saying, ‘The people bring much more than enough for the service of the work which the Lord commanded us to do.’ . . . And the people were restrained from bringing, for the material they had was sufficient for all the work to be done—indeed too much.” (Exod 36:5-7). That is the new covenant experience, a heartfelt response to the graciousness of God!

Oh that the people kept this new covenant experience, but unfortunately Israel in their later history too often fell back into a “old covenant” experience of works righteousness. But let us not let their later failings blind us to the awesome new covenant response at the foot of Sinai described in these last chapters of Exodus.

At the end of Exodus, the sanctuary was completed and dedicated. “Then the cloud covered the tabernacle of meeting, and the glory of the Lord filled the tabernacle.” . . . “And the cloud of the Lord was above the tabernacle by day, and fire was over it by night, in the sight of the house of Israel, throughout all their journeys.” (Exod 40:34, 38). Even as often fell into the old covenant experience, the Shekinah glory in the sanctuary (and later in the Temple) was a

standing testimony to God's grace.

I invite you, behold, yes, embrace, God's Covenant of amazing Blazing Grace!