



Exodus - Chapter Twenty Three

II. Exodus 19:1-40:38 - The Covenant at Sinai (continues)

II.b Exodus 20:1-23:33 - Covenant Words and Rules (continues/concludes)

Summary of Chapter Twenty Three

The chapter commences with a range of commands that should ensure that natural justice prevails, yet there is indication that many will not obey. The person of God is called to act according to the law and not majority rule.

There is now further clarification of the need for a Sabbath rest on the seventh day. Likewise, the land is to receive a sabbatical every seven years.

The law now briefly outlines the need for every man to honour three sacred festivals dedicated to the Lord: Unleavened Bread in the Spring, First Fruits at the first harvest and Ingathering as the final harvest crop is brought in.

God promises to send his angel to lead the people into the land of Canaan, where he will give the Israelites total victory and a life of great freedom provided they do not adopt the ways of the pagan nations in the land and worship on the Lord. The Promised Land is described as stretching from the Red Sea all the way north to the River Euphrates.

II.b.viii Exodus 23:1-9 - Justice for All

The instruction for Israel not to wrong or oppress an alien frames 22:21-23:9, which seeks to help the people recognise that they are called beyond keeping the basic rules for a civil society, to embodying the very character of the Lord in caring for those who are easily oppressed and even those who may be predisposed against them.

Verses 1-3 and 6-8 complement one another and warn Israel against acting to pervert justice by being a false witness. The structures of civil and religious life in

Israel were meant to represent the evaluation of the Lord and to form the people according to his character, which is why the warnings are grounded in the judgement of the Lord: <<*for I will not acquit the guilty*>>.

¹ You shall not spread a false report. You shall not join hands with the wicked to act as a malicious witness. ² You shall not follow a majority in wrongdoing; when you bear witness in a lawsuit, you shall not side with the majority so as to pervert justice; ³ nor shall you be partial to the poor in a lawsuit.

Exodus 23:1-3

You shall not spread a false report. This command is connected with the next because the circulation of a false report was and is a fundamental way to join hands with the wicked and follow a majority in wrongdoing.

Since the issue was a false report, it was proper to ask and require proof from the person bringing the report, and proof as required in the Bible, i.e. from two or three witnesses as stated in Deuteronomy 19:15.

A malicious witness is better translated as ‘witness in a charge of violence’, for the thought is that a verdict will be fatal to the defendant. The false witness will not go unpunished if caught: <<*A false witness will not go unpunished, and a liar will not escape*>> (Proverbs 19:5).

You shall not follow a majority in wrongdoing. It has always been in the nature of man to follow a crowd to do evil, since the time Adam followed Eve into sin.

It is easy and dangerous to side with the majority so as to pervert justice, to follow with our peers and popular opinion. When doing so promotes a false report or perverts justice, then it is sin. This is why it is so important for Christians to choose their company carefully: <<*Do not be deceived: ‘Bad company ruins good morals’*>> (1 Corinthians 15:33).

One of the most extreme changes of crowd behaviour in the Bible is when the people of Jerusalem went from shouting: <<*‘Hosanna! Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord! Blessed is the coming kingdom of our ancestor David! Hosanna in the highest heaven!’*>> (Mark 11:9b-10), to shouting: <<*Crucify him! Crucify him!*>> (John 19:6b).

Nor shall you be partial to the poor in a lawsuit. No partiality was to be shown to the poor; the poor were not to be favoured just because they were poor, any more than the rich should be favoured because they are rich. The facts of a case and the principles of justice should decide a dispute, not the high or low standing or perceived victim status of those involved.

⁴ When you come upon your enemy's ox or donkey going astray, you shall bring it back. ⁵ When you see the donkey of one who hates you lying under its burden and you would hold back from setting it free, you must help to set it free.

Exodus 23:4-5

This command to do good for your enemy was important: <<*You have heard that it was said, "You shall love your neighbour and hate your enemy." But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you*>> (Matthew 5:43-44). It showed that goodness and kindness in Israel was not only required for those one liked and loved, but to all. One might not need a command to do this for a friend, but it was necessary for the enemy and one who hates. The principle was clear: feelings about someone do not determine right and wrong behaviour towards them. There are principles of justice that must be observed above such personal feelings.

⁶ You shall not pervert the justice due to your poor in their lawsuits. ⁷ Keep far from a false charge, and do not kill the innocent or those in the right, for I will not acquit the guilty. ⁸ You shall take no bribe, for a bribe blinds the officials, and subverts the cause of those who are in the right.

Exodus 23:6-8

The warning not to pervert the justice due includes the refusal to take advantage of the poor in a lawsuit as well as to show partiality to them by altering testimony. God knows that it was always easy for the poor to be neglected in the administration of justice. Being poor did not make one right in a legal dispute, but it should never keep them from getting a fair hearing and justice, as confirmed later by: <<*Do not rob the poor because they are poor, or crush the afflicted at the gate*>> (Proverbs 22:22).

Keep far from a false charge, and do not kill the innocent or those in the right.

The promotion of truth was essential under God's law and this remains the case under Christ: <<*So then, putting away falsehood, let all of us speak the truth to our neighbours, for we are members of one another*>> (Ephesians 4:25). God knows how much evil and injustice is justified among men by lies, so he emphasised truth telling in Israel's daily life and legal practices. The command 'do not kill the innocent and the righteous' not only spoke to the need to protect life in the womb, but also that there are instances where justice requires the death of the guilty and the wicked.

You shall take no bribe, for a bribe blinds the officials, and subverts the cause of those who are in the right. In the promotion of justice, God also commanded against bribery: <<‘*Cursed be anyone who takes a bribe to shed innocent blood.*’ *All the people shall say, ‘Amen!’*>> (Deuteronomy 27:25). Specifically, he commanded against the taking of a bribe; bribe makers cannot exist without bribe takers: <<*For the company of the godless is barren, and fire consumes the tents of bribery*>> (Job 15:34), and: <<*Ah, you who are heroes in drinking wine and valiant at mixing drink, who acquit the guilty for a bribe, and deprive the innocent of their rights!*>> (Isaiah 5:22-23).

⁹ You shall not oppress a resident alien; you know the heart of an alien, for you were aliens in the land of Egypt.

Exodus 23:9

You shall not oppress a resident alien. God commanded Israel to show kindness and fairness towards those whom they might not be kind towards by nature: <<*When an alien resides with you in your land, you shall not oppress the alien. The alien who resides with you shall be to you as the citizen among you; you shall love the alien as yourself, for you were aliens in the land of Egypt: I am the Lord your God*>> (Leviticus 19:33-34). In later times, some rabbis taught there was an obligation, or at least permission, to hate one’s enemy. Here, fairness and kindness were commanded even to one who hates - even as Jesus made clear in the Parable of the Good Samaritan; refer to Luke 10:30-37.

You know the heart of an alien. The Hebrew is not the usual word for heart but *nepes*, which can be translated ‘life’ or ‘self’. Here it seems to have more the meaning of ‘desires and longings’.

II.b.ix Exodus 23:10-13 - Sabbatical Year and Sabbath

The Sabbath law is re-enforced and the principle extended to the land, which shall be worked for six years and then allowed to lay fallow for the seventh. During the fallow year there will still be produce but these are to be gathered only by the poor or left for wild animals to eat.

¹⁰ For six years you shall sow your land and gather in its yield; ¹¹ but the seventh year you shall let it rest and lie fallow, so that the poor of your people may eat; and what they leave the wild animals may eat. You shall do the same with your vineyard, and with your olive orchard.

Exodus 23:10-11

For six years you shall sow your land. The principle of the Sabbath applied to more than the working week. There were also Sabbath years, where the land was to rest and lie fallow for one year out of seven. The pattern of work and rest that

is to frame Israel's week (v.12) is also to be applied to the pattern of years; refer to Leviticus 25:2-7. The practice was resumed after their return from Babylonian exile: *<<and if the peoples of the land bring in merchandise or any grain on the sabbath day to sell, we will not buy it from them on the sabbath or on a holy day; and we will forego the crops of the seventh year and the exaction of every debt>>* (Nehemiah 10:31).

The seventh year you shall let it rest and lie fallow. By tradition, some in Israel accomplished this by only cultivating six-sevenths of their land at any one time, and practicing a method of crop rotation. The people would also be well aware of how Joseph had stored food during the years of plenty in Egypt so that there would be sufficient during the years of famine. The Israelites would follow this example to ensure they had sufficient food during the sabbatical year.

That the poor of your people may eat. One reason God commanded the Sabbath year was to give the poor something to eat, in that they were allowed to harvest and process that which grew unplanted from the fallow ground. This was a way to help the poor that demanded both that the landowners hold themselves back from maximum profit, and that the poor work to help themselves. Failure of Israel to give the land its Sabbath-years determined the certainty and the duration of the Babylonian exile: *<<I will devastate the land, so that your enemies who come to settle in it shall be appalled at it. And you I will scatter among the nations, and I will unsheathe the sword against you; your land shall be a desolation, and your cities a waste. Then the land shall enjoy its sabbath years as long as it lies desolate, while you are in the land of your enemies; then the land shall rest, and enjoy its sabbath years. As long as it lies desolate, it shall have the rest it did not have on your sabbaths when you were living on it>>* (Leviticus 26:32-35), and: *<<He took into exile in Babylon those who had escaped from the sword, and they became servants to him and to his sons until the establishment of the kingdom of Persia, to fulfil the word of the Lord by the mouth of Jeremiah, until the land had made up for its sabbaths. All the days that it lay desolate it kept sabbath, to fulfil seventy years>>* (2 Chronicles 36:20-21).

What they leave the wild animals may eat. Mankind may have been given dominion over the animal kingdom but they still have a responsibility to ensure their survival and well-being through provision like this. History has shown that mankind has progressively destroyed habitats for their own gain, driving many animal species to extinction.

¹² For six days you shall do your work, but on the seventh day you shall rest, so that your ox and your donkey may have relief, and your home-born slave and the resident alien may be refreshed. ¹³ Be attentive to

all that I have said to you. Do not invoke the names of other gods; do not let them be heard on your lips.

Exodus 23:12-13

On the seventh day you shall rest, so that your ox and your donkey may have relief. The principle of Sabbath rest was intended for all people, and even for animals. In the same pattern, the Sabbath rest fulfilled in Jesus is intended for all people: <<*The Lord is not slow about his promise, as some think of slowness, but is patient with you, not wanting any to perish, but all to come to repentance*>> (2 Peter 3:9), and even for all creation: <<*For the creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the children of God; for the creation was subjected to futility, not of its own will but by the will of the one who subjected it, in hope that the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to decay and will obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God*>> (Romans 8:19-21).

As is true for anything that the Lord commands, keeping the Sabbath as a day of rest (20:8-11) is good, not only for the individual who is responsible to act faithfully but also for others, in this case for all those who are a part of the household, as confirmed by: <<*Then he said to them, 'The sabbath was made for humankind, and not humankind for the sabbath'*>> (Mark 2:27).

Be attentive to all that I have said to you. It is not for the believer to pick and choose when to live by the Word of God or which commands to obey: <<*So be careful not to forget the covenant that the Lord your God made with you, and not to make for yourselves an idol in the form of anything that the Lord your God has forbidden you*>> (Deuteronomy 4:23), and: <<*Pay close attention to yourself and to your teaching; continue in these things, for in doing this you will save both yourself and your hearers*>> (1 Timothy 4:16).

Do not invoke the names of other gods; do not let them be heard on your lips. The Sabbath was to be dedicated to the Lord God, and not to any foreign or false god. Of course, this command applies to every day and not just to the Sabbath. It is, after all, the first of the commandments: <<*Then God spoke all these words: I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery; you shall have no other gods before me*>> (Exodus 20:1-3).

II.b.x Exodus 23:14-19 - The Annual Festivals

This section reaffirms the celebration of the Festival of Unleavened Bread and introduces the Festival of Harvest and the Festival of Ingathering, which are explained in greater detail later in Leviticus 23:9-22.

¹⁴ Three times in the year you shall hold a festival for me. ¹⁵ You shall observe the festival of unleavened bread; as I commanded you, you

shall eat unleavened bread for seven days at the appointed time in the month of Abib, for in it you came out of Egypt. No one shall appear before me empty-handed. ¹⁶ You shall observe the festival of harvest, of the first fruits of your labour, of what you sow in the field. You shall observe the festival of ingathering at the end of the year, when you gather in from the field the fruit of your labour. ¹⁷ Three times in the year all your males shall appear before the Lord God.

Exodus 23:14-17

Three times in the year you shall hold a festival for me. God commanded that three times a year, all men in Israel had to come together to keep the most important festivals. These included Unleavened Bread, which is connected to Passover, Harvest or First Fruits, and Ingathering. Details regarding the observance of these festivals will be given later in the Book of Leviticus.

Although such festivals were compulsory only for the men quite often whole families would travel to Jerusalem to participate in the celebrations, as described by Jesus' own human family in Luke 2:41-52. Passover especially was always intended to be a family celebration.

¹⁸ You shall not offer the blood of my sacrifice with anything leavened, or let the fat of my festival remain until the morning.

Exodus 23:18

You shall not offer the blood of my sacrifice with anything leavened. Since leaven was a symbol of sin and corruption, atoning blood could never be offered with leavened bread. This law is repeated: <<*You shall not offer the blood of my sacrifice with leaven, and the sacrifice of the festival of the passover shall not be left until the morning*>> (Exodus 34:25), and: <<*No grain-offering that you bring to the Lord shall be made with leaven, for you must not turn any leaven or honey into smoke as an offering by fire to the Lord*>> (Leviticus 2:11).

Or let the fat of my festival remain until the morning. If atonement was to be regarded as a complete work, it must be wholly offered unto the Lord; everything must be given to God, not a portion reserved for later. This especially included the fat of the sacrifice, the best portion of the sacrificed animal.

¹⁹ The choicest of the first fruits of your ground you shall bring into the house of the Lord your God. You shall not boil a kid in its mother's milk.

Exodus 23:19

The choicest of the first fruits of your ground you shall bring into the house of the Lord your God. When Israel came into Canaan, they had a special responsibility to make a first fruits offering to God, in addition to their regular first fruits offering. Giving God the first and the best honoured him as the good provider of all things.

You shall not boil a kid in its mother's milk. The reason for this rule is not made explicit here or in the other Scriptures where it is repeated, i.e. Exodus 34:26 and Deuteronomy 14:21. Boiling a young goat in its mother's milk may have been a pagan religious ceremony practiced by the nations in Canaan as a way to induce fertility. Alternatively, it may be seen as a gross violation of the natural order: the young goat should drink its mother's milk and gain life from it, not be cooked in it.

Because of strange rabbinical interpretations, today this command is the reason why an observant Jew cannot eat a kosher cheeseburger. Observant Jews today will not eat milk and meat at the same meal, or even on the same plates with the same utensils cooked in the same pots, because the rabbis insisted that the meat in the hamburger may have come from the calf of the cow that gave the milk for the cheese, and the cheese and the meat would 'boil' together in one's stomach, and be a violation of this command.

II.b.xi Exodus 23:20-33 - The Conquest of Canaan Promised

The Lord promises to send his angel before the people into Canaan and calls them to obey him by driving the nations out, by destroying their places of worship, and by being faithful in serving him alone.

²⁰ I am going to send an angel in front of you, to guard you on the way and to bring you to the place that I have prepared. ²¹ Be attentive to him and listen to his voice; do not rebel against him, for he will not pardon your transgression; for my name is in him. ²² But if you listen attentively to his voice and do all that I say, then I will be an enemy to your enemies and a foe to your foes.

Exodus 23:20-22

The angel who will go before Israel is described in ways that closely identify him with God: the Lord tells Israel not to rebel against him because he will not pardon your transgression and because my name is in him, implying God's nature and character, and that to listen attentively to his voice is to do all that I say: <<*Hear and give ear; do not be haughty, for the Lord has spoken*>> (Jeremiah 13:15).

To bring you to the place that I have prepared. The same principle is true of a believer's life with Jesus today. Not only is it true that Jesus goes before them to prepare a place for them in heaven (John 14:2-3), but the place they walk in today was prepared by God, and where they will walk tomorrow is prepared by him also.

When Joshua finally leads the people into the land, he meets a figure outside Jericho referred to as 'the commander of the army of the Lord' who speaks nearly identical words as those spoken to Moses at the Burning Bush, (compare Exodus 3:2 with Joshua 5:13-15); both his title and drawn sword seem to identify him with the angel who has protected Israel (14:19), and who is promised here to go before them into Canaan; refer also to 33:2. Some see the angel as a theophany of the pre-incarnate Christ.

²³ When my angel goes in front of you, and brings you to the Amorites, the Hittites, the Perizzites, the Canaanites, the Hivites, and the Jebusites, and I blot them out, ²⁴ you shall not bow down to their gods, or worship them, or follow their practices, but you shall utterly demolish them and break their pillars in pieces.

Exodus 23:23-24

My angel goes in front of you. God did not bring Israel out of Egypt to leave them in the wilderness. His plan was to bring them into his land of promise and abundance. Although there were mighty nations in Canaan, his angel would bring an obedient Israel into the Promised Land.

You shall not bow down to their gods, or worship them, or follow their practices. The Canaanite people were deeply depraved and morally degraded, and this was a natural result of the depraved and degraded idol gods they served: <<*You shall not follow the practices of the nation that I am driving out before you. Because they did all these things, I abhorred them*>> (Leviticus 20:23). Therefore it was essential that Israel did not imitate their idol worship or even allow it to continue: <<*Thus says the Lord: Do not learn the way of the nations, or be dismayed at the signs of the heavens; for the nations are dismayed at them*>> (Jeremiah 10:2).

²⁵ You shall worship the Lord your God, and I will bless your bread and your water; and I will take sickness away from among you. ²⁶ No one shall miscarry or be barren in your land; I will fulfil the number of your days.

Exodus 23:25-26

You shall worship the Lord your God, and I will bless your bread and your water. If they did reject the gods of the Canaanites and continue in faithfulness to

God, he promised to bring blessing throughout their whole life. Among the gods worshipped in both Egypt and Canaan were those believed to have control over crops, health, or fertility. The Lord made it clear through the signs in Egypt that he has power over all of life and he calls Israel to serve him alone, promising the people blessings through the provisions of food, health and offspring. When tempted by the devil, Jesus confirmed that God alone must be worshipped: <<*Jesus said to him, 'Away with you, Satan! for it is written, "Worship the Lord your God, and serve only him"'*>> (Matthew 4:10).

²⁷ I will send my terror in front of you, and will throw into confusion all the people against whom you shall come, and I will make all your enemies turn their backs to you. ²⁸ And I will send the pestilence in front of you, which shall drive out the Hivites, the Canaanites, and the Hittites from before you. ²⁹ I will not drive them out from before you in one year, or the land would become desolate and the wild animals would multiply against you. ³⁰ Little by little I will drive them out from before you, until you have increased and possess the land.

Exodus 23:27-30

I will send my terror in front of you, and I will make all your enemies turn their backs to you. God promised that he would go before Israel and into the land for them, using both obviously supernatural methods (send my terror), as also seen when Jacob travelled through the land with his family: <<*As they journeyed, a terror from God fell upon the cities all around them, so that no one pursued them*>> (Genesis 35:5), and seemingly natural phenomenon (send the pestilence in front of you).

The word translated pestilence here is also translated as hornet. Although the exact meaning of the Hebrew is unknown it clearly describes an act of God rather than one of the people, e.g. <<*I sent the hornet ahead of you, which drove out before you the two kings of the Amorites; it was not by your sword or by your bow*>> (Joshua 24:12).

The land would become desolate and the wild animals would multiply against you. This was just one reason why it was better for God to defeat their enemies little by little. Doing it in what seemed to be the easy way - clearing out all of Israel's enemies out at once - had consequences Israel could not see or appreciate.

Little by little. God promised to drive out the enemies of Israel from Canaan, but he would not drive them out all at once. Israel may have wanted to have the land all cleared out before them, but God knew it was not best for the land or for them. Indeed, it would be good for them to face the challenges of battle and other tests in order to appreciate what they had been given.

³¹ I will set your borders from the Red Sea to the sea of the Philistines, and from the wilderness to the Euphrates; for I will hand over to you the inhabitants of the land, and you shall drive them out before you.

³² You shall make no covenant with them and their gods. ³³ They shall not live in your land, or they will make you sin against me; for if you worship their gods, it will surely be a snare to you.

Exodus 23:31-33

From the Red Sea to the sea of the Philistines, and from the wilderness to the Euphrates. This encompassed a huge portion of land, one that Israel has never fully possessed. Many suppose that the closest they came was in the days of King David and Solomon, when the inhabitants of some parts of the land paid tribute to the king in subjugation. Yet this was a territory that at some points stretched all the way to the Euphrates River. This is indicated in correspondence concerning the Israelites after they returned from exile: <<*Jerusalem has had powerful kings ruling over the whole of Trans-Euphrates, and taxes, tribute and duty were paid to them*>> (Ezra 4:20 NIV).

There is a spiritual principle here. God may grant, but the believer must possess. He withholds their possession of many blessings until they will partner with him in bold faith and obedience. Christians have been granted <<*every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places*>> in Christ (Ephesians 1:3b); but will only possess what they will partner with him in faith and obedience to receive. God is not an indulgent, spoiling father, pouring out on his children resources, blessings, and gifts they are not ready to receive or be responsible with. When his people are ready to possess in faith, what was promised becomes realised.

You shall make no covenant with them and their gods. Through lack of discernment, Israel did end up making a covenant with some of the people of the land, see especially Joshua Chapter 9. They paid the price by having to face frequent periods of subjugation and war with the peoples they were supposed to have driven out of the land. Responsibility for this lay with their failure to do what God had commanded: <<*Now the angel of the Lord went up from Gilgal to Bochim, and said, 'I brought you up from Egypt, and brought you into the land that I had promised to your ancestors. I said, "I will never break my covenant with you. For your part, do not make a covenant with the inhabitants of this land; tear down their altars." But you have not obeyed my command. See what you have done!*>> (Judges 2:1-2). There is no area of the law that Israel or anyone other than Jesus has ever kept perfectly.