

LESSONS FROM EXODUS
YAHWEH: THE COVENANT-MAKING GOD
Church of Christ / 9301 Sheldon Road
Plymouth, Michigan 48170
Royce Dickinson, Jr. / 11.25.2001

About a year-and-a-half ago, in the Summer of 2000, I took a boat ride from Grand Portage, Minnesota, to Isle Royale—a wilderness island in Lake Superior that is Michigan’s only National Park. On the way, we passed by several rocky outcroppings—rugged, ragged islands, some of which were no larger than my house. As we slowly slid by one such tiny island, there before me was one of the most spectacular sights I have ever seen. On a stone ledge, some twenty feet above us, sat a congregation of bald eagles peering down upon us. Oh what a scene!

As far back as I can remember, I have always been fascinated with eagles. In the family room of my house hangs a large painting of an eagle. In my bedroom, two stuffed-eagles are perched atop my dresser. In my office in this building sits a wood-carved eagle. And these are just a few of my eagle relics. (So now you know who suggested the picture for the front of the bulletin.) I can show you in the Hebrew scriptures where the biblical writers were impressed with the eagle, the king of the birds, because of the massive and majestic expanse of its outstretched wings,¹ its watchful and protective carrying of its young on its back,² and its ability to soar to great heights³ at considerable speed⁴ and to fly over long distances.⁵ It should come as no surprise, then, that one of my favorite depictions of God in connection with the Exodus of His people from Egypt is found in these words spoken to the Israelites: “You have seen what I did to the Egyptians, how I carried you on eagle’s wings and brought you to Myself” (Exod 19:4). The image of God as a mother eagle is most fully described in Deut 32:10-12:

¹Deut 32:11; Jer 48:40; 49:22; Ezek 17:3, 7.

²Deut 32:10-11.

³Jer 49:16; Obad 4; Job 39:27.

⁴2 Sam 1:23; Jer 4:13; Lam 4:19.

⁵Deut 28:49; Isa 40:31.

He [Yahweh] found him [Israel] in a desert land,
and in the howling waste of the wilderness;
He encircled him, He cared for him,
He kept him as the apple of His eye.
Like an eagle that stirs up its nest,
that flutters over its young,
spreading out its wings, catching them,
bearing them on its pinions,
the LORD [Yahweh] alone did lead him,
and there was no foreign god with Him (Deut 32:10-12, RSV).

This is a wonderful image of Yahweh as a mother eagle who cares for her young during that time when they are especially vulnerable. They can find refuge from the threats of life under the shadow of her wings. It is also an image of growth and maturation, a time of testing, as the mother eagle seeks to help her young learn to fly for themselves. She pushes them out of the nest so that they can try their wings, and if they flounder, she swoops down under them and bears them up on her own strong wings.

The subject of our study in today's lesson is—*Yahweh: The Covenant-Making God*. Now, you may be wondering what eagles have to do with covenants. Believe it or not, I have not led you on a “wild goose chase.” Or, should we say, “wild eagle chase”? The primary passage that we will study has eagle imagery in it, and—to be honest—I found it much easier and more exciting to begin by talking about eagles than to begin by talking about covenants. If you would, turn with me to the nineteenth chapter of Exodus, and let's start reading at verse 1. (The translation I am reading is my own.)

In the third month of the exodus of the Israelites from the land of Egypt, on the very day they came to the wilderness of Sinai—having set out from Rephidim and coming to the wilderness of Sinai where they pitched camp; in fact, Israel had pitched camp in sight of the mountain—Moses went up to God. And Yahweh called out to him from the mountain, saying, “This is what you are to say to the house of Jacob and what you are to tell the children of Israel: ‘You yourselves have seen what I did to the Egyptians, how I carried you on eagle's wings and brought you to Myself. So now, if you will obey Me fully and keep My covenant, you will be My treasured possession among all the peoples. Because all the earth is Mine, so you yourselves will be My own kingdom of priests and holy nation.’ These are the words that you are to repeat to the children of Israel.”

Moses went back and summoned the elders of the people and set before them all these words, just as Yahweh had commanded him. All the people responded together, saying, “All that Yahweh has spoken we will do!” And Moses brought the people's answer back to Yahweh (Exod 19:1-8).

The word “covenant”—aside from its use in legal documents, for folks today it is basically a religious term. In the Bible, the word “covenant”⁶—broadly defined—refers to an arrangement of some kind between two or more parties. In the Ancient Near Eastern World, relationships between individuals as well as relationships between countries revolved around and were regulated by means of covenants, or treaties. These covenants fall into two basic categories: (1) a parity treaty, where the contracting parties are on equal terms; and (2) a suzerain-vassal treaty, where the initiative for the agreement comes from an unquestionably superior power. The covenant at Mount Sinai is similar in form to a suzerain-vassal treaty. Yahweh, the suzerain (the unquestionably superior power), initiates a contractual arrangement with Israel, the vassal. Since we do not have the time in a single sermon to survey all that Scripture has to say about covenant, I will cut to the bottom line: *covenant is the principal image used in the Bible to express the relationship between God and humans*. Now, that very point presents us Westerners with a problem; after all, the covenant concept is—by far and large—foreign to our way of thinking. Covenant-based relationships in the Western World have become almost obsolete. The most noteworthy exception is the fragile institution of marriage.

In spite of such limitations, I will attempt to impress upon you the extraordinary and revolutionary character of Yahweh’s covenant with Israel. Next Sunday, in my lesson—*Yahweh: The God of Law*—we will focus on the content of the covenant. But today, let’s look at the character of the covenant.

First, the idea of a covenantal relationship between God and an entire people is extraordinarily revolutionary. It is incredible! There is no known parallel in history for such a notion, and there is no analogy to Israel’s claim to have undergone such a national religious experience. No other people have made such a claim because no other god has done such a thing. It is incredible! Second, unlike all other treaties, which are distinct and discrete documents of state, the Sinai covenant is embedded in a narrative context from which it cannot be separated and from which it derives its meaning and significance. The covenant is part of a story. Without the story, the covenant makes no sense. Without the covenant, the on-going story makes no sense. More than anything

⁶Hebrew: בְּרִית (berith); Greek: διαθήκη (diatheke).

else, what I hope you will see is that the covenant at Sinai is Yahweh's *gift* to the children of Israel. In the act of deliverance from Egypt, Yahweh had already cared for the Hebrew people before He asked any response from them. "Covenant"—it is a way of speaking of all of life lived in submission to a saving God. "Covenant"—it reveals the unfathomable depth of the love of God, who struggles within Himself for the sake of sustaining His relationship with His people. Listen to Yahweh's own words spoken through the prophet Hosea:

Oh, how can I give you up, Israel? How can I let you go? How can I destroy you like Admah and Zeboiim? My heart is torn within Me, and My compassion overflows. No, I will not punish you as much as My burning anger tells Me to. I will not completely destroy Israel, for I am God and not a mere mortal. I am the Holy One living among you, and I will not come to destroy" (Hos 11:8-9, NLT).

Yahweh's steadfast loyalty to His covenant—it expresses a love that is as indescribable as it is incomprehensible.

Let's revisit verse 5 of Exod 19. Note the phrase "if you will obey Me fully." The language speaks more of a personal commitment to God Himself than to particular commandments. There is as yet nothing specified to be obeyed. Note the phrase "keep My covenant." The covenant at Sinai is a specific covenant within the context of the already existing covenant God made with Abraham. Here is my point: *to obey God fully and to keep His covenant entails more than merely obeying the laws given at Sinai.* In verse 8, the Israelites respond, "All that Yahweh has spoken we will do!" This is an open-ended commitment to Yahweh, to whatever Yahweh may have to say at any point in time.

When I read this text, I am reminded of my wedding vows. Almost twenty-four years ago, Terri and I pledged our love, our loyalty, and our lives to one another. Our promises were open-ended commitments to be husband and wife for as long as we both should live. Although we could not know what the future would bring, we could know that we would always face it together. In a lock-box in my desk at home, there is a document: it is a marriage license. That document is a witness to a covenant between Terri and me. It is a testimony to the fact that on January 13, 1978, we mutually entered into a marriage covenant. But that document is *not* the covenant. The covenant is the marriage *relationship*. There is far more to marriage than simply possessing a piece of paper. Marriage is a relationship established on the basis of a covenant.

What I am trying to say is this: *obeying God and having a covenant-relationship with Him involves much more than obeying a set of laws.* The fundamental flaw of legalism is that it is an adherence to a document rather than an attachment to a relationship.

Look again at the text we have been studying. Because all the earth belongs to Yahweh, the Israelites are to be a kingdom of priests and a holy nation. Israel is commissioned to be God's people on behalf of the world which is God's. Israel is called to be (1) Yahweh's "treasured possession," a special group of people from among all the nations belonging to Yahweh, and therefore people whom Yahweh can call on to be the bearer of His purpose. (2) "A kingdom of priests," that is, a servant nation instead of a ruling nation. (3) "A holy nation," that is, a people set apart not simply *from* other peoples, but *for* other peoples. To be God's people is to be instruments for God's purposes in the world. Israel is to obey Yahweh and to keep His covenant, not only for her sake, but also for the sake of the world.

The mission of God's people has not changed. The church, in continuity with Israel, is to take up the task to which the people of God have long been called. The Apostle Peter puts it this way:

But you [That's us! You and me, the church!] are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for His possession, [Why? Peter, why?] so that you may declare the wonderful deeds of Him who called you out of darkness into His marvelous light (1 Peter 2:9, my translation).

As the people of God, we have been called *out* of the world, placed *in* the world, and sent *to* the world. Another way of saying this is we are *in* the world, but not *of* the world, *for* the world.⁷

The essence of a covenantal relationship with the LORD God is succinctly stated by the Prophet Jeremiah: "I will be your God and you will be My people" (Jer 7:23; 31:33, NIV). *Yahweh: The Covenant-Making God*—Is He yours? Are you His? I close with this prayer from the pen of John Wesley (1703-1791):

Lord, I am no longer my own, but Yours. Put me to what You will, rank me with whom You will. Let be employed by You or laid aside for You, exalted for You or brought low by You. Let me have all things, let me have nothing, I freely and heartily yield all things to Your pleasure and disposal. And now, O glorious and

⁷For an excellent discussion of the missiological implications of 1 Pet 2:9-10, see Johannes Blauw, *The Missionary Nature of the Church: A Survey of the Biblical Theology of Mission* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1962), 126-136.

blessed God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, You are mine and I am Yours. So be it. Amen (John Wesley).⁸

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