

**Sidebar** - What Really Happened at Mount Sinai? Four  
Answers to one question. By Baruch J. Schwartz

## Untangling Three Accounts of the Giving of the Law

**Key:** P-maroon red E-green J-dark blue

### Exodus 19

(1) On the third new moon after the Israelites had left the land of Egypt, on that very day they arrived at the wilderness of Sinai. (2) Having journeyed from Refidim, they arrived at the wilderness of Sinai, and they encamped in the wilderness. Israel encamped there in front of the mountain, (3) and Moses went up to God. The LORD called to him from the mountain, saying, “Thus shall you say to the house of Jacob and declare to the children of Israel: (4) ‘You have seen what I did to the Egyptians, that I bore you on eagles’ wings and brought you to Me. (5) Now then, if you will obey Me and keep my covenant, you shall be My treasured possession among all the peoples. Indeed, all the earth is Mine, (6) but I shall have you as My kingdom of priests and holy nation.’ These are the words you shall speak to the children of Israel.” (7) Moses came down and summoned the elders of the people, and put before them all the words that the LORD had commanded him. (8) All the people answered as one, saying, “Whatever the LORD says, we will do!” Moses brought back the people’s words to the LORD. (9) And the LORD said to Moses, “I am going to come to you in a thick cloud, in order for the people to overhear Me speaking with you and so believe in you ever after.” Moses reported the people’s words to the LORD. (10) The LORD said to Moses, “Go to the people and have them remain pure today and tomorrow, and have them wash their clothes. (11) Let them be ready for the third day; for on the third day the LORD will come down, in the sight of all the people, on Mount Sinai. (12) Set up bounds for the people round about, saying, ‘Beware of going up the mountain or even touching its edge; whoever touches the mountain shall be put to death. (13) No hand shall touch him, but he shall be either stoned or shot. Beast or man, he shall not live.’ When the ram’s

horn sounds a long blast, they may go up the mountain.” (14) Moses came down from the mountain to the people and warned the people to stay pure, and they washed their clothes. (15) He said to the people, “Be ready for the third day; do not have contact with a woman.” (16) On the third day, as morning dawned, there was thunder and lightning, and a dense cloud upon the mountain, and a very loud blast of the horn; and all the people in the camp trembled. (17) Moses led the people out of the camp toward God, and they positioned themselves at the foot of the mountain. (18) Mount Sinai was all in smoke, for the LORD was coming down upon it in fire; the smoke rose like the smoke of a kiln, and the whole mountain trembled violently. (19) The blare of the horn grew louder and louder. Moses would speak, God responding to him with sound. (20) The LORD came down upon Mount Sinai, to the top of the mountain, and the LORD called Moses to the top of the mountain and Moses went up. (21) The LORD said to Moses, “Go down, warn the people not to break through to the LORD to gaze, lest many of them perish. (22) The priests also, who are going to approach the LORD, must purify themselves, lest the LORD break out against them.” (23) But Moses said to the LORD, “The people cannot come up Mount Sinai, since You Yourself warned us, saying, ‘Set bounds about the mountain and sanctify it.’” (24) So the LORD said to him, “Go down, and come back up together with Aaron and the priests, but let not the people break through to come up to the LORD, lest He break out against them.” (25) And Moses went down to the people and told them.

## **Exodus 20**

(1) God spoke all these words, saying, “I am YHWH your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, the house of bondage; you shall have no other gods besides Me....[until Exod 20:14]” (15) When the people saw the thunder and lightning, the blare of the horn and the mountain smoking, they fell back and stood at a distance. (16) They said to Moses, “You speak to us, and we will obey; but let not God speak to us, lest we die.” (17) Moses answered the people, “Do not worry, for God has only come in order to give you an experience, so that the fear of Him may be ever with you, in order that you go not

astray.” (18) So the people remained at a distance, while Moses entered the thick cloud where God was. (19) Then the LORD said to Moses: “Thus shall you say to the Israelites: ‘You yourselves have seen that I spoke to you from the heavens. (20) You shall make no other gods with Me.... [Exodus 21] (1) And these are the statues you shall set before them.... [until 23:33]”

## Exodus 24

(1) But to Moses He had said, “Come up to the LORD, with Aaron, Nadab, Abihu, and seventy elders of Israel, and bow low from afar. (2) But only Moses shall come near the LORD; the others shall not come near, and the people shall not come up with him at all.” (3) Moses came down and told the people all the words of the LORD and all the statutes, and the people answered with one voice and said, “All the words that the LORD has said we will do!” (4) Next Moses wrote down all the words of the LORD, arose early the next morning, and set up an altar at the foot of the mountain and twelve pillars for the twelve tribes of Israel. (5) He delegated some young men of the Israelites and they offered burnt offerings and sacrificed bulls to the LORD as sacrifices of well-being. (6) Moses took half the blood and put it in basins, and the other half he dashed against the altar. (7) Then he took the written covenant and read it aloud to the people. They said, “Everything that the LORD has said we will do and obey!” (8) Moses took the blood and dashed it on the people and said, “This is the blood of the covenant which the LORD has hereby made with you over all these words.” (9) So Moses and Aaron, Nadab and Abihu, and seventy elders of Israel ascended, (10) and they saw the God of Israel. Under His feet there was a likeness of a pavement of sapphire, like the very sky for splendor. (11) Yet He did not raise His hand against the leaders of the Israelites; they gazed upon God, and they ate and drank. (12) The LORD said to Moses, “Come up to Me on the mountain and remain there, and I will give you the stone tablets with the teaching and commandments which I have written to instruct them.” (13) So Moses and his attendant Joshua arose, and Moses ascended the mountain of God. (14) To the elders he had said, “Wait here for us until we return to you. You have

Aaron and Hur with you; let anyone who as a legal matter approach them.” (15) Moses ascended the mountain; the cloud covered the mountain. (16)The Majesty of the LORD abode on Mount Sinai, and the cloud hid it for six days. On the seventh day He called to Moses from the midst of the cloud. (17) The Majesty of the LORD appeared in the sight of the Israelites as a consuming fire on the top of the mountain. (18) Moses went inside the cloud and ascended the mountain, and Moses remained on the mountain for forty days and forty nights.

### **Exodus 25**

(1) The LORD spoke to Moses, saying, (2) “Speak to the Israelites and have them bring Me gifts... (8) let them make Me a sanctuary so that I may dwell among them... (10) they shall make an ark of acacia wood... (17) make a cover of pure gold... (18) make two cherubim of gold... (21) place the cover on top of the ark and deposit inside the ark the testimony which I will give you. (22) There I will meet with you, and I will tell you, from above the cover, from between the two cherubim that are on top of the ark of the testimony, all that I have to command you for the Israelites.” ....[until 31:17]

### **Exodus 32 - E only**

(1) Meanwhile, when the people saw that Moses was so long in coming down from the mountain, they people gathered against Aaron and said to him, “Come make us a god who shall go before us, for that man Moses, who brought us from the land of Egypt—we do not know what has happened to him.....”

### **Exodus 31 – P only**

(18) When He finished speaking with Him on Mount Sinai, He gave Moses the two tablets of the testimony, [Exodus 32] (15) Moses turned and went down from the mountain with the two tablets of the testimony in his hand. [Exodus 34] (29) As Moses came down from Mount Sinai with the two tablets of the testimony in his hand, Moses was not aware that the skin of his face was radiant from

speaking with Him. (30) But Aaron and the Israelites saw that the skin of Moses' face was radiant, so they were afraid to come near him. (31) So Moses called to them, and Aaron and all the chieftains in the assembly returned to him, and Moses spoke to them. (32) Afterwards all the Israelites came near, and Moses commanded them everything that the LORD had told him on Mount Sinai. (33) When he finished telling them, he put a veil over his face. (34) (Thenceforth, whenever Moses would go in to the presence of the LORD to speak with Him, he would leave the veil off until he came out; when he had come out and told the Israelites what he had been commanded, (35) the Israelites would see how radiant the skin of Moses' face was. Moses would then put the veil back over his face until the next time he went in to speak with Him). [Exodus 35] (1) Moses convoked the whole Israelite community and said to them, "These are the things that the LORD has commanded... (4) take from among you gifts... and make all that the LORD has commanded: the tabernacle, its tent..."[until 40:33] [Exodus 40] (34)...the cloud covered the Tent of Meeting, and the Majesty of the LORD filled the tabernacle. (35) Moses could not enter the Tent of Meeting, because the cloud had settled upon it and the Majesty of the LORD had filled the tabernacle. (36) (Thenceforth, whenever the cloud would lift from the tabernacle, the Israelites would set out on their various journeys; (37) but if the cloud did not lift, they would not set out until such time as it did lift. (38) For a cloud of the LORD rested over the tabernacle by day, and fire would appear in it by night, in the view of all the house of Israel throughout their journeys.) [Leviticus 1] (1) So He called to Moses. The LORD spoke to him from within the Tent of Meeting, saying: (2) "Speak to the Israelites and say to them, 'When any you presents an offering....'" [until end of Leviticus, and intermittently in Numbers; see the narrator's superscriptions in Lev 7:35-38; 26:46; 27:34; Num 36:13]

