CHAPTER 11

THE MOUNT OF THE LAW

(*Exod. 19, 20*)

Qohelet tells us that God "has put eternity into man's mind" (Eccles. 3:11), and because of that, man seeks the fixed and permanent amid all the flux and change of life. He turns both physically and in memory to the places that have played a decisive part in his life. Even more, if he is a religious man, he will seek the holy sites of his religion and his personal experience. Though it takes a less obvious form, this is as true of Protestant movements as of traditionalist ones.

To a great extent God delivered Israel from its seeking after holy places by exalting Mt Zion and its temple to a pre-eminence that reduced the other places that had played their part in the nation's spiritual history to little more than historical sites. If this is not always true of more unsophisticated Judaism today, it is mainly due to the corrupting influence of popular Christianity and Islam. So few Christians have been able to grasp the liberating power of the knowledge of Christ's abiding presence in every place and situation.

One result of this tendency to ignore holy places was that the time came when Israel completely forgot the situation of Sinai-Horeb, the mount of the Law. Our present identifications are the result of monkish speculation in the fourth century and have as doubtful validity as most of the "holy sites" pointed out to credulous pilgrims. The rabbis wisely said that the Torah was given in the desert, so that no

nation could make a special claim to it. In the same way God has seen to it that we cannot go to any one spot in the desert and affirm with certainty that it was here that God revealed his character and will to Israel and through Israel to mankind.

As the pillar of cloud and fire led Israel to the mountain, Moses' heart must have leapt within him, for he recognized that here God had spoken to him in the burning bush and was now on the point of fulfilling the sign he had then given him (Exod. 3:12). Though no more than a year had elapsed, the spot where the bush had been was doubtless no longer identifiable, but the mountain was there, and the people had been brought to it to serve God, even as he had promised.

The people pitched their tents and waited, wondering what would happen next. Suddenly they saw Moses beginning to climb the mountain. Was he going to tell God, "I have accomplished the task thou didst give me to do; here is thy people"? Then, not from a flame of fire in a desert bush, but out of the very heart of the mountain came the voice of God. If the dried up bush had spoken of Israel's need and Moses' weakness, so now the bare and arid rocks of Sinai testified to the people's heart of stone, over which Jehovah would yet triumph. The voice gave Moses a message for the people.

"If you will obey my voice and keep my covenant" – this was to be no compact between equals, and there was to be no bargaining. The great, victorious King was offering to take Israel as his people, but it was to be on his terms, and these had to be accepted even before they were made known. It should be noted that all that had gone before (19:4) was not being held out as a bribe. It was mentioned purely as the evidence of Jehovah's victory and of his right to demand. Israel was being left completely free to accept its deliverance from Egypt and yet refuse to be God's people.

"You shall be my own possession (*segullah*) among all peoples (*'ammim*) for all the earth is mine" – human choice almost inevitably involves rejection to a greater or less

degree. If God chooses for special privilege or service, it never implies a corresponding rejection, and those not included in any particular choice may well find that it was ultimately made that they might be blessed by it and be brought by it into a wider purpose and service. Here, in announcing his choice, God specifically claims his lordship over all the earth and uses for the nations the word normally reserved for Israel (see below). The *segullah*, cf. Deut. 7:6; 14:2 and also Tit. 2:14, 1 Pet. 2:9, was that private treasure over which a king exercised sole and complete control. This is the beginning of the growing revelation that God intervenes in the life and affairs of his chosen people, be it Israel or the Church, and not only in the life of special individuals, in a way that in some measure suspends the working out of natural forces in the world around them. They need not experience what their neighbours would in a similar situation, but they cannot claim to share in their neighbours' prosperity and well-being. They are under a divine providence that baffles the wisdom of the unbeliever.

"And you shall be to me a kingdom of priests", or better, "priests over whom I rule". The common West Semitic word for priest is *komer*, but in the Old Testament it is used only for idolatrous priests, viz. 2 Ki. 23:5, Hos. 10:5, Zeph. 1:4. The common word in Hebrew is *kohen*, though seldom found outside. There is much to be said for Martin Buber's suggestion that *kohen* meant primarily an attendant on a god or king who had the right of access at any time. This would satisfactorily explain the anomalous use of the word in 2 Sam. 8:18; 20:26, and also why, in spite of the promise, priesthood in Israel was reserved to the tribe of Levi, and ideally to the house of Aaron. The priests had the responsibility of teaching the terms and requirements of the covenant and of carrying out the sacrifices and purifications that maintained it, but they did not create Israel's access to God. This may be seen especially in the Psalter, above all in psalms like 50, 51, where the necessity of sacrifice is expressly denied.

"And a holy nation (*goi*)" it is questionable whether there is much difference in practice between *goi* (nation) and *'am* (people), but as a general rule the latter is used for Israel, the former for other nations. It is therefore remarkable that in these solemn promises the usual practice should have been reversed (see above). As earlier the implication was that every people belonged to God, so here it surely is that there is no quality inherent in Israel to distinguish it from other nations except its being holy, i.e. set apart for and belonging to God. Whenever Israel wanted to be like all other nations, cf. 1 Sam. 8:5, there has been an implicit element of apostasy, though this has not necessarily been obvious.

The elders of the people accepted God's offer unconditionally without asking what he might demand (19:8), and on the third day the people were summoned to draw near the mountain by the sound of the *shophar* (19:16, 19), the ram's horn, not to be confounded with the silver trumpets of Lev. 10:1–10. This was the traditional way of announcing outstanding events to the people, whether wars (Amos 3:6, Jer. 4:5), or major religious events (Lev. 23:4; 25:9, Num. 29:1).

Sinai presented an awe-inspiring sight. Its peak was veiled in cloud, out of which came thunderclaps and flashes of lightning. As the people drew nearer to the mountain, it seemed to go up in smoke and flame, while it rocked with earthquake shocks. The immediate cause may possibly have been volcanic action, though there is no trance of it near the traditional site, but it signified the descent of the Lord.

We may reasonably ask why Mt Sinai should have taken on such a terrifying appearance. There is no difficulty in the order to fence in the mountain, for the concept of the holy, of God's separation from man, even from his own people, is basic in Old Testament thought, but that does not explain the sheer terror of the scene. Asaph was to say, "Thou didst lead thy people like a flock by the hand of Moses and Aaron" (Psa. 77:20). The people had seen God's mighty acts and terrible deeds in Egypt and at the Red Sea, but they had

repeatedly, even in their murmurings, experienced his love and favour.

The answer probably lies in the dichotomy that runs throughout the Bible and can be summed up in phrases like, "It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God" (Heb. 10:31) and, "The wrath of the Lamb" (Rev. 6:16). So much of salvation history was worked out in the light of God's grace and mercy, as the shadow of the cross, which was to be, was thrown backwards, that many simply cannot give adequate weight to the wrath of God and hence propound a complete or virtually complete universalism – the opposite mistake is equally made by those who reduce the saved to a "little flock", and so exalt wrath above mercy.

Before Israel entered into a covenant with Jehovah, it had to learn the reality that Joshua was later to express, "Now therefore fear the Lord and serve him in sincerity and in faithfulness ... You cannot serve the Lord for he is a holy God" (Jos. 24:14, 15). So the terrors of the mountain served as a foil to God's opening words, "I am Jehovah your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage".

Any and every presentation of the Ten Words which does not start with this declaration distorts them; without it they are law, with it they are essentially the logical and inescapable sequel to God's grace. Eight of the ten are in their English translation prohibitions. But, as Martin Buber rightly pointed out, if the Hebrew is taken literally, they are a statement of what a man in true covenant relationship with God will not do, not what he should not, i.e. they say "You will not ..." As we shall see, the two positive commands, rightly understood, are open to a similar interpretation.

For many there are difficulties created by the verbal differences between Exod. 20:1–17 and Deut. 5:6–21. If we ignore the linking of the last five commandments in the latter by "and" (English "neither"), these differences are

confined to the fourth and tenth. Today there is fairly general agreement that they were briefer in their original form. Moses, through whose instrumentality they were preserved, had the right both to amplify, where amplification was needed, and to vary that amplification slightly.

The first three of the Ten Words draw certain conclusions from God's redemptive acts. No power of any kind should be attributed to any other god (20:4). It is not concerned with the philosophical question of whether there can be other gods. What matters to those in covenant relationship with Jehovah is that they can be treated, if they indeed exist, as "nothingness", a term found often in Isaiah. Those who attribute undue power to demons in the Christian sphere are in danger of forgetting this.

The Ten Words were the only part of the Torah given directly by God to the whole people without an intermediary. All the rest was given through Moses (Exod. 20:19–21, cf. Gal. 3:19). In fact all that follows, whether directly in Exod. 20:22–23:23 (The Book of the Covenant), or indirectly in Lev. 18–26 (The Code of Holiness), and Deut. 12:1–30:20 (The Deuteronomic Code), is merely a commentary on the Ten Words. On their basis the covenant was sealed. All the ritual legislation, so often thought of when the Law is mentioned, was given later with the purpose of enabling mortal, weak and sinful man to remain within the covenant. Equally, when the ritual legislation found its fulfilment in the one full and perfect sacrifice, it was that man might find the principles enshrined in the Ten Words in his heart, and might by the power of the Holy Spirit carry them out in his daily walk.

The *second* (20:4–6) stresses that any attempt to depict the greatness of Jehovah, whether physically or verbally, must degrade him, and this God does not tolerate – he is "jealous". J. B. Phillips has warned us of the peril in the striking title to his book, *Your God is too Small*. Nothing reduces the attractiveness of the Gospel message more than an inade-

quate picture of God, which is normally linked with an inadequate life. That is why it is just here that we are given a picture of the sins of the great-grandfather working themselves out down to the great-grandson, i.e. the normal family group at the time. The low view of God and its consequences will affect all under the influence of the family head. In contrast, however, God shows steadfast love to thousands of generations of those who love him and keep his commandments. This, the traditional Jewish interpretation of "thousands", is indubitably correct, cf. p. 117.

The *third* of these commandments expresses the respect that the greatness of God should create in his people. The controversies as to the exact area covered by it are barren. It is not merely a prohibition of the irreverent or trifling use of the name of God, which should include that of Jesus. It also covers that attitude of mind which thinks that it has fully grasped God's will and ways. So often, when we say "God", or "the Holy Spirit", we really mean "I" or my understanding of God's "will". The ultra-orthodox attitude in Judaism, which first replaced Yahweh (Jehovah) by Adonai (Lord), and then Elohim (God) by various surrogates, e.g. *shem* (Name), *maqom* (Place), *shamayim* (Heaven), and now finds its bizarre expression in English by writing G-d instead of God, entirely misses the point of the commandment. Yahweh or God is being brought in, even if disguised, and it is the state of mind in which this is being done that matters.

The *fourth* word, the former of two positive ones, is really a double one; it is a command to do and to refrain from doing. The word used for labour (*'abad*) implies compulsion. In God's purpose man must work (Gen. 3:17–19, 2 Thess. 3:10). The call to remember is essentially that one should not forget that one is God's creation and hence one's life should be spent in his service; one should also see to it that one's dependants have the same possibility. Two reasons are given for the observance of the Sabbath. In

Exod. 20:11 it is that God also rested on the seventh day, but in Gen. 2:2 this resting is explained by saying that he desisted (*va-yishbat*) that day, cf. p. 16. The Sabbath is the day of desisting, which implies rest, because one's work has been finished. In Deut. 5:15 the motivation is that they were set free from forced labour in Egypt. Therefore both they, their family their slaves and domestic animals, as well as their paying guests, should know freedom. The two motivations are picked up in the New Testament. In Matt. 11:28–30 we have rest in spite of labour, because the labour has become partnership with the Lord; in Heb. 4:9, 10 the compulsion of circumstances becomes a Sabbath-keeping, as one enters the service which is perfect freedom.

Just as the fourth word is a reminder that the freed life is in God's world and lived for him, so the *fifth* stresses that one is not merely a saved individual, but also a member of a saved people. In this way it links the commandments which concern one's relationship to God with those that speak of society. We realize our membership of society first of all in the family, through which one was brought into being according to God's will. But one's family owes its existence to a wider society still. The interpretation of the commandment is not always easy, and it must be done in the light of our Lord's words, "Render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and to God the things that are God's" (Mk. 12:17). The honour that God is demanding is the recognition of his perfect wisdom in determining our sex, our social position and our inherited talents, cf. 1 Cor. 7:17–24.

The *five commandments that follow* do not profess to introduce a list of the most heinous sins against one's fellow-men – indeed, such a list would be contrary to scriptural principles, for it is the motive behind the act that determines the magnitude of the evil in God's sight. They are rather those things which are essentially a denial of one's covenant relationship to God and to one's fellow-men.

God is the only giver of life, and the taking of life is the

one action where no form of reparation is really possible. Strikingly enough the first four prohibitions are really linked together by this concept, even though it is only the first of them that expressly mentions murder. There is no prohibition here of war or of judicial execution, however much this may be claimed by some. The fact of war and of the need of judicial execution are recognized in Scripture, even though they may create one of the greatest moral problems for Christians. The word used here, *ratzaḥ*, is found only in contexts where the killing has not been authorized by due authority, i.e. it can always be rendered "to murder".

As may be seen especially in Ezek. 22 "shedding of blood", i.e. murder, can have a much wider meaning in God's sight than the mere act of killing. When we speak of adultery, we normally think of its sexual aspect, but as its use to describe idolatry shows, the Bible is really thinking of the breaking of the covenant bond of marriage, which so often destroys the family, which God had instituted as the basis of society. The modern stress on the dangers of the broken home is sufficient to show that our linking of it with murder is not fanciful.

In exactly the same way theft, especially in a society which knew neither insurance nor state welfare, and in which the majority of the population lived near the poverty line, could well bring disaster and death in its train. In addition, theft, whether underhanded and undetected, or carried out openly by the strong and mighty against whom there was no redress, was bound to break up the unity of society either by distrust or deep resentment.

The popular saying, "Give a dog a bad name and you might as well hang him", is unfortunately all too true. There is no reason for thinking that the prohibition of bearing false witness refers especially to the courts of law. Even though many an innocent person has been destroyed by false evidence, equal and perhaps greater damage can be done by whispered slander and malicious gossip, as well as

by the passing on of hearsay stories which have not been checked.

There is a double evil in coveting. It is an insult to God and his love, for it suggests that his giving has been inadequate and unfair, or that he will not judge, where the things coveted have been obtained by improper means. Then it shows lack of love towards others, for it implies the willingness to see them deprived of what they have, if only one's own desires can be satisfied. Behind coveting lies lack of love, and as Hosea was later to stress, God's covenant love (*hesed*) expects a corresponding love linking the individual members of his covenant people.

When Jeremiah foretold the making of a new covenant (31:31–34) because the old had been broken, since it had come from outside, not from man's heart, he did not mention a new Torah. It was not the basis of the old covenant that was at fault; it was its inability to guarantee its being kept. The clear implication is that the basis of the old remained. Where it is understood as expounded above, a statement of the manner in which the man who has really experienced God's redemption through a new birth will live, this should obviously be the case.

Whether or not the Ten Words are recited in Christian worship, whether in full, or in our Lord's summary of them (Mk. 12:29–31), should never be allowed to become a matter of controversy among Christians. What is important is that we should never forget, nor be allowed to forget that here we have an outline of the type of life the man in true covenant relationship to God will live, though the New Testament adds some strands, which deepen it.

(The term *Torah*, used frequently in this chapter, represents the biblical and rabbinic term for the Mosaic revelation as a whole. Though it is translated *law*, it really means *instruction*, and indicates that God was doing more than giving a mere series of commandments. The term *Ten Words* is the regular Jewish expression for the Ten Commandments. It is here used to indicate that we are dealing with more than commands.)