

## THE BIBLE TAKE 2: CHOSEN PEOPLE, PROMISED LAND

**A Sermon by Rev. Dr. Ed Piper**

Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Waynesboro

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Regardless of who you voted for on Tuesday, I cannot imagine that you didn't experience a sense of excitement and history-in-the-making when we all watched Barack Obama and his beautiful family emerge on stage as our next First Family. I cannot remember a presidential election in my lifetime that has provoked such an extraordinary mixture of pride and apprehension—pride in the power of democracy, yet also apprehension about the enormity of the challenges our new president must face. Great promise combined with great peril.

As I was preparing my sermon, I began to see some fascinating parallels between our current situation and the people of Israel more than 3,000 years ago. Led by a charismatic but untested leader named Moses, the Israelites narrowly escaped from their Egyptian oppressors. Now what? They headed south into the unfamiliar and inhospitable wilderness of the Sinai peninsula. But Moses himself had been there before. Years earlier, after he had murdered an abusive Egyptian slave-driver, Moses fled into the same wilderness where he married a local woman and had at least one son. It was here that he had his famous encounter with the burning bush, in which the voice of Yahweh commands him to return to Egypt and lead his people from their bondage. In that firsthand encounter with this mysterious force who refuses to identify himself by name, Moses joins Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob (renamed Israel) in receiving a direct promise from Yahweh that their people are God's Chosen People.

That promise reaches its climax in the experience of Moses and his followers at Mt. Sinai (also known as Mt. Horeb). According to the account in Exodus chapters 19 and 20 and immortalized in Cecil B. De Mille's famous movie, it is here that the covenant between Yahweh and the Israelites is consummated. The divine force that appears at Mt. Sinai has all the earmarks of what historians of religion call a **sky god**. As summarized by biblical scholar Marcus Borg,

“Thunder and lightning erupt, and the sound of an ear-splitting trumpet can be heard as a thick cloud covers the sacred mountain. As God descends upon the mountain in fire, it quakes violently. Moses ascends the mountain and there, at the place where heaven and earth meet, he goes to meet God. Moses' role as mediator of the covenant and giver of divine law has begun. What happens at Sinai is that Israel becomes a people, a nation. Though the narrator of the Pentateuch has frequently used the words 'Israelites' and 'Israel' earlier in the story, it is here that Israel comes into existence. Here God offers the people a covenant [which I will read again]:

You have seen what I did to the Egyptians, and how I bore you on eagles' wings and brought you to myself. Now therefore, *if you obey my voice and keep my covenant*, you shall be my treasured possession out of all the peoples. Indeed the whole earth is mine, but you shall be for me *a priestly kingdom and a holy nation*. [Exodus 19:4-6, quoted in Marcus Borg, *Reading the Bible Again for the First Time*, p. 99]

So the Israelites begin to view themselves as God's Chosen People, **but there are strings attached. Above all, they must obey Yahweh's commandments.** Much of the remainder of

the Torah (the first five books of the Hebrew and Christian Bibles) consists of more than 600 laws and regulations supposedly dictated by Yahweh to Moses. Many of them are borrowed from even more ancient Middle Eastern scriptures, in particular the Code of Hammurabi, which contains 282 laws chiseled into a rock in Babylon more than 500 years earlier. [Barry L. Bandstra, *Reading the Old Testament*, p. 138] Let me reiterate the statement I made in my opening sermon on the Bible last month. Contrary to the claims of the fundamentalists that the Bible speaks in a single voice, the Bible itself is a classic example of **religious pluralism**.

The Bible speaks to us in many different voices. To further illustrate this point, there are three different versions of “the” Ten Commandments. In addition to the most familiar version found in Exodus 20, there is a very different version, which is found in Exodus 34 and repeats only three of the original ten commandments. The remaining seven commandments all deal with proper ritual conduct, thus reflecting the point of view of a priestly author. This version was given by Yahweh after Moses shattered the first edition in anger over the Israelites’ disloyalty in building the golden bull-calf idol, which is associated with the earth god known as Baal, as they waited impatiently for Moses to return from the mountaintop. Immediately after receiving the commandment, “Thou shalt not kill,” Moses orders the Levites to kill 3,000 of their fellow Israelites as punishment for their unfaithfulness to Yahweh. (The third version found in Deuteronomy 5 is part of a speech by Moses shortly before he died, and is very similar to the Exodus 20 version.)

Let me now return to the whole concept of **covenant**. A covenant is an agreement between two or more parties. The parties to the Sinai covenant are Yahweh and his Chosen People. In exchange for their obedience and worship, Yahweh promises the Israelites that he will aid them in their conquest of the Promised Land of Canaan. If they fail to keep his commandments, they will be punished. The **first take** on the Old Testament covenant sees a **hierarchical system** based on dominance and submission, obedience and punishment. The vast majority of the more than 600 commandments found in the Torah are concerned with maintaining **purity** in religious ritual and hygiene practices and enforcing **male control** over women as a way of protecting the purity of their lineage. Some of these commandments are merely amusing, such as what to do when an ox gores a person or another ox, what foods may or may not be eaten, and so on. Others are deeply offensive, such as the circumstances under which a man may sell his daughter into slavery, or the death penalty for male homosexual behavior, female adultery, or even cursing one’s parents. Modern-day biblical literalists would do well to read **all** of these commandments before they selectively quote passages that serve their personal interests.

But there is also a **deeper** level of intention embedded within the covenant between Yahweh and his Chosen People—a level that invites a “**take 2.**” It is based not on hierarchy but on **justice and equality**. As Marcus Borg [p. 100] points out, these commandments “include some of the most radical socioeconomic legislation in human history. For example, no interest is to be charged on loans to fellow Israelites. Especially striking are the regulations for the sabbath year and the jubilee year. Every Sabbath (seventh) year, all debts owed by Israelites to other Israelites are to be forgiven and all Hebrew slaves are to be released. [Deut. 15:1-18] Every jubilee (fiftieth) year, all agricultural land [which may have been lost because of unpaid debts] is to be returned at no cost to the original family of ownership. [Leviticus 25] Imagine what it would be like if **these** commandments were taken literally today! The goal of these social justice commandments was to prevent the accumulation of wealth and power in the hands of a small

minority. The violation of the spirit of these commandments is what inspired prophets like Jeremiah, Amos, and Hosea to condemn the materialistic excesses of the powerful elites after the Israelites had established their kingdom in the Promised Land.

In the words of the prophet Amos, speaking on behalf of Yahweh: “Hear this word, you cows of Bashan who are on Mount Samaria—you who oppress the poor, who crush the needy, who say to their husbands, ‘Bring us something to drink!’ Yahweh has sworn by his holiness: the time is definitely coming when they will take you away with hooks, even the last of you with fishhooks.” [Amos 4:1-2] And: “I hate and despise your festivals; I do not take pleasure from your pious meetings. . . . Away from me with the noise of your songs! The melody of your harps I will not hear. Let justice roll down like water, righteousness like an eternally flowing stream.” [Amos 5: 21-24]

The central message of the Old Testament prophets is that the covenant with God requires not only loyalty to Yahweh, but also justice for all people. The covenant directs us not only “upward” toward God but “outward” toward other human beings. These two sides of the covenant are expressed succinctly in Jesus’ response to the question, “What is the greatest commandment?” His answer is twofold: Love God with all your heart, and love your neighbor as yourself. [Mark 12:28-31] In the words of former UUA president John Buehrens, “The sense of a special covenant with the universal God is *not* a call to special privilege for Israel. It is *a call to special responsibility*, as a moral example to other peoples.” [*Understanding the Bible*, p. 67]

How might we apply the idea of covenant to our lives? Liberal theologian James Luther Adams identified five “well-worn” principles of progressive religious living:

- (1) The conviction that revelation is not sealed. . . . Scripture is useful, but never God’s final word.
- (2) Relationships between people shall be covenantal; that is, they should rest on mutuality and persuasion, not on coercion and power-over.
- (3) We share a human obligation to work toward what Dr. [Martin Luther] King called “the Beloved Community” of love and justice.
- (4) Merely thinking ourselves virtuous and well-intentioned won’t get us there. . . .
- (5) With all the universe provides and with the openness of history, we are never justified in an ultimate pessimism, but must ever keep faith with the future. [Buehrens, p. 76]

As we embark in the wilderness of an uncertain future, let us place our hopes for our Promised Land not only on the shoulders of our talented President-elect, but in our mutual commitment to persevere. Remembering the enduring lessons of the Exodus experience, Michael Walzer sums them up this way:

Wherever you live, it is probably Egypt.

There is a better place, a world more fair, full of promise and hope.

The way to it is through the wilderness. There is no other way to get from here to there except by the hard way, being tested as we go. [Buehrens, p. 71]

To which I would add: We’re in this together, and that is our greatest strength.