

Ex. 20:1 God spoke all these words, saying:

Ex. 20:2 I the LORD am your God who brought you out of the land of Egypt, the house of bondage: ³ You shall have no other gods besides Me.

Ex. 20:4 You shall not make for yourself a sculptured image, or any likeness of what is in the heavens above, or on the earth below, or in the waters under the earth. ⁵ You shall not bow down to them or serve them ...

Ex. 20:19 [22] The LORD said to Moses:

Thus shall you say to the Israelites: You yourselves saw that I spoke to you from the very heavens:

²⁰ With Me, therefore, you shall not make any gods of silver, nor shall you make for yourselves any gods of gold. ²¹ Make for Me an altar of earth and sacrifice on it your burnt offerings and your sacrifices of well-being, your sheep and your oxen; in every place where I cause My name to be mentioned I will come to you and bless you. ²² And if you make for Me an altar of stones, do not build it of hewn stones; for by wielding your tool upon them you have profaned them. ²³ Do not ascend My altar by steps, that your nakedness may not be exposed upon it.

Ex. 21:1 These are the rules that you shall set before them:

Ex. 21:2 When you acquire a Hebrew slave ...

Jeffrey Tigay, "Exodus," *Jewish Study Bible*

20.19–23.33: The Book of the Covenant (or Covenant Code or Collection) lays out the terms of the covenant in detail, beginning with a law about idolatry and proper worship (20.19–23), followed by a series of civil and criminal laws (21.1–22.16) and then a collection of ethical and religious exhortations concluding with further laws about worship (22.17–23.19), and an epilogue containing promises of reward for fidelity and warnings about idolatry (23.20–33).

Nahum Sarna, *Exodus* (JPS Torah Commentary)

THE REGULATION OF WORSHIP (vv. 19–23 [22–26])

These verses bridge the foregoing and following sections. They continue the preceding narrative by featuring the instructions that Moses received as he “approached the thick cloud”; they also serve as a crucial introduction to the following laws because without verse 19 (22) there would be no ante-cedents to 21:1. At the same time, these verses, together with 23:19, encase the regulations controlling interpersonal and societal behavior within a framework of prescriptions that govern the relationship of the individual to God.

It is to be noted that verses 19–20 (22–23) are of general concern, being addressed to all Israel and couched in the plural. Verses 21–23 (24–26) are formulated in the singular and pertain to the individual in a specific circumstance. The delineation of the authentic modes of divine worship is the unifying theme of the entire section.

***The Book of the Covenant: The Laws* (21:1–24:18)**

Ex. 23:19 The choice first fruits of your soil you shall bring to the house of the LORD your God. You shall not boil a kid in its mother’s milk.

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William H. C. Propp, *Exodus* (Anchor Bible) to 28:42

SPECULATION: Many scholars observe that 20:18(15)–21(18), or part thereof, could belong elsewhere (see further below). What if the passage originally stood within 19:8–9? ...

The passage also could (and probably should) be left where it is. The references to “*the* sounds,” “*the* torches” and “*the* horn” sound like allusions to things already mentioned (19:16). At any rate, Y`hweh’s commands to Moses in JE are now found in 20:22(19)ff. As for the original source of 20:18(15)–21(18), the references to “fear,” “testing” and “Deity” suggest E.

SPECULATION: Here is another possibility for JE. Inserting 20:18(15)–21(18) between 19:17 and 19b would arguably enhance the narrative flow. The counterargument is that, were this the case, there would have been no reason to shift 20:18(15)–21(18) to its present location, whether during the combination of J with E or during the combination of JE with P.

We come next to 20:22(19)–26(23) and more D-like language—even though, ironically, the contents are *anti-Deuteronomistic*, assuming and authorizing multiple local shrines and lay sacrifice. I take these verses to be the text of E’s tablets. Seekers after simplicity argue the following: We have two pre-Priestly narrative strands, J and E; *ergo*, the two codes of Exodus must each belong to one of these sources. The First Code in chaps. 20–23, contiguous with a basically Elohist context in chaps. 19–20, 24 and calling God “(the) Deity” (21:5, 12; 22:7, 8, 27), goes to E. Exod 34:11–26 by default goes to J.

The core of the First Code is 21:1–22:16.

20:23(20). *Don’t make.* I take the following laws as the likely contents of E’s tablets, displaced in the redacted text by the Decalog.

20:24(21). *earthen altar.* `Ādāmā ‘earth, dirt’ contrasts with “silver” and “gold” in the preceding verse (and also, arguably, with the metal tool of v 25[22]). When the Syrian Naaman transports a supply of Israelite dirt to enable him to worship Y`hweh in Damascus, he presumably fashions the earth into just such an altar (2 Kgs 5:17). On P’s hollow Bronze Altar, apparently filled with earth or stones each time it is erected, see below.

Whether a pile of soil or a structure of mud brick, it is important that the altar appear improvised and untidy. Preferably it should be of dirt, which the rains will swiftly wash away. If a more permanent stone installation is desired, it must still possess a rude appearance. “The law is a protest against the intrusion of culture into the cult, a reversion to the ‘holy’ simplicity of an older time” (Holzinger 1900: 81). Also, the very act of stone-shaping (*psl*) is suspect, since the same art can produce an idol (*pesel*).

וְאִם־מִזְבֵּחַ אֲבָנִים תַּעֲשֶׂה־לִּי לֹא־תִבְנֶה אֹתוֹן גִּזְיֹת 25

²² And if you make for Me an altar of stones, do not build it of [hewn stones](#).

Jeffrey Tigay, “Exodus,” *Jewish Study Bible*

20.19–23: The altar. All of the Torah’s law collections begin with laws contrasting forbidden, pagan means of worship with permitted ones at a proper place of worship (see also chs 25–31 in contrast to Exod. ch 32 [see introductory n. to 31.18–32.35]; Lev. ch 17; Deut. ch 12).

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