

THE SYMBOLISM OF SINAI

Symbols in the Bible are significant. Everything in the Bible is significant! The Word of God is both reliable and eternal! Jesus said: **“Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will never pass away” (Matt. 24:35)**. All Scripture is inspired of God and is profitable for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness (2 Tim. 3:16). The Scriptures, as you know, do not come from men, but from God. God inspired holy men to speak and write as they were moved by the Holy Spirit (2 Pet. 1:21). Consequently, nothing in the Bible is insignificant or irrelevant. All Scripture is inspired and nothing in the Bible is without a purpose (Rom. 15:4).

As we have said, the symbols used in the Scriptures are inspired. The Bible is filled with symbols. Here is an example. In the first year of Belshazzar, king of Babylon, Daniel had a dream and visions passed through his mind as he was lying on his bed. God communicated to Daniel by means of symbols. In this vision he saw four great beasts. The first three were a lion, a bear, and a leopard. The fourth beast was different with large iron teeth and ten horns. The interpretation of these symbols is clear: **“The four great beasts are four kingdoms that will rise from the earth” (Dan. 7:17)**.

There is a sense in which symbols do not need to be interpreted. Imagine, for example, that you open the door and encounter a lion, a bear, a leopard, or a terrifying beast with large iron teeth and ten horns. It will not be necessary for you to consult a commentary to know what to think. This terrifying experience will communicate something to you immediately. It will be profound, and unforgettable. Other insights and understanding may come later, but the symbols chosen by God communicate something immediately.

With this in mind let us consider the symbolism of Mt. Sinai. Some very unusual things happened on that mountain when the Law was given. With reference to this the book of Hebrews declares: **“You have not come to a mountain that can be touched and that is burning with fire; to darkness, gloom and storm; to a trumpet blast or to such a voice speaking words that those who heard it begged that no further word be spoken to them, because they could not bear what was commanded: ‘If even an animal touches the mountain, it must be stoned to death.’ The sight was so terrifying that Moses said, ‘I am trembling with fear.’” (Hebrews 12:18-21)**.

Exodus 19:16-19 mentions other symbols and points out that the giving of the Law on Mt. Sinai was associated with thunder, lightening, a thick cloud, an earthquake, the mountain trembling violently, and a loud trumpet blast that grew even louder and louder. Further, the whole mountain was covered with smoke that billowed up like smoke from a furnace. The Hebrews who were there experienced these symbols in person. As we have said, nothing in the Bible is insignificant. These unusual events on Sinai were choreographed by God for a purpose. It is interesting to speculate what that purpose was. What impressions immediately came to the minds of those Hebrews as they received the Law of God? What emotions flooded their minds? Should the symbols of Sinai communicate to us today the same thing that they communicated to the Hebrews back then?

But their experience at Sinai was not over. When Moses came down from the mountain, as you know, he found the people fornicating before a golden calf. Then Moses said: **“Whoever is for the Lord, come to me.’ And all the Levites rallied to him. Then he said to them, ‘This is what the**

Lord, the God of Israel, says: Each man strap a sword to his side. Go back and forth through the camp from one end to the other, each killing his brother and friend and neighbor.’ The Levites did as Moses commanded, and that day about three thousand of the people died.” (Ex. 32:26-28). Now what do you suppose they were thinking when 3,000 of their brothers, friends and neighbors died?

Paul reminded the Corinthians that the Law of Moses etched in stone brought death (2 Cor. 3:7). This is not a happy thought! Further. The fading glory of Sinai was symbolized by the glory that faded from the face of Moses. Moses even put a veil over his face to keep the Israelites from seeing that the radiance was fading away (2 Cor. 3:13). The fact that these laws were written in cold, hard, and lifeless stone is also significant! There is no life in a stone!

- ✓ These symbols are in the Bible for a reason.
- ✓ What do they mean?
- ✓ What was God trying to communicate by means of these symbols?
- ✓ These are valid questions for us to ponder!

THE PURPOSE OF THE LAW

Let us begin by pointing out that the Law was not given to save us. The Scriptures are clear: **“No one will be declared righteous in his sight by observing the law; rather through the law we become conscious of sin” (Rom. 3:20).** We write laws to try and control people. God didn’t! From the very beginning God knew that no one was going to be controlled by the Law. God had another reason for giving the Law. That purpose is essential to our salvation. God designed the Law to be such a harsh teacher that it would lead us to Christ that we might be justified by faith (Gal. 3:24). Please consider these words of Moses: **“Take this book of the Law and place it beside the ark of the covenant of the Lord your God. There it will remain as a witness against you. For I know how rebellious and stiff-necked you are. If you have been rebellious against the Lord while I am still alive and with you, how much more will you rebel after I die” (Deut. 31:26,27).**

Moses predicted this rebellion but for some reason the Jews didn’t believe him. They even trusted in Moses to be their savior. Jesus, however, said that instead of Moses being their savior, he would be their accuser. Jesus said: **“But do not think I will accuse you before the Father. Your accuser is Moses on whom your hopes are set. If you believed Moses you would believe me, for he wrote about me. But since you do not believe what he wrote, how are you going to believe what I say” (Jn. 5:45-47).** Many Scriptures confirm that God gave the Law, not to save us, but to make us “become conscious of sin”. Here are a few examples:

- So the Law was given that every mouth might be stopped and all the world become guilty before God (Rom. 3:19).
- Through the Law we become conscious of sin (Rom. 3:20).
- The Law was added so that trespasses might increase (Rom. 5:20).
- Our sinful passions are aroused by the Law (Rom. 7:5).
- Apart from the Law sin is dead (Rom. 7:8).
- The power of sin is the Law (1 Cor. 15:56).
- As we have said, the Law was given to convince us that we are sinners. In this way the Law can lead us to Christ that we might be justified by faith (Gal. 3:24).

- What kind of a symbol would you use to convey the nature of the Law?

THANKFULLY, THE LAW IS NOT LIKE GOD AND GOD IS NOT LIKE THE LAW

Please consider:

- God does not reveal Himself through the Law, He reveals Himself through Jesus.
 - Jesus is the Word of God (Jn. 1:1). That is, Jesus is the Vehicle by which God communicates His nature to man.
 - **“No one has ever seen God, but God the One and Only, who is at the Father’s side, has made Him known (Jn. 1:18).**
 - Jesus said: **“Anyone who has seen me has seen the Father” (Jn. 14:9).**
 - The name of Jesus is **“Immanuel”** which means **“God with us”** (Matt. 1:23).
 - Jesus is God manifest in a body (1 Tim. 3:16).
 - In Jesus all the fulness of the Godhead is manifest in bodily form (Col. 2:9).
 - Etc.
- Of course God is not like the Law! He couldn’t be! The Law changed (Heb. 7:12), but God never changes (Mal. 3:6). Since Jesus is God He doesn’t change either (Heb. 13:8).
- The Law was only a shadow (Heb. 10:1). God, however, is reality and does not change like shifting shadows (Ja. 1:17). Shadows always change, but God never changes.
- Obviously, no one can be recognized by their shadow! That’s why the students of the Law didn’t recognize Jesus. They chose to cling to a shadow and reject reality. Incredibly, they crucified Jesus because of the Law. How ironic! Experts in the Law used the Law to crucify the Author of the Law. They told Pilate: **“We have a law, and according to that law He must die” (Jn. 19:7).**
- God is not like the Law. He is like Jesus!
- What kind of symbol would you suggest to communicate the nature of the Law?

WE CAN ESCAPE FROM THE LAW BY DEATH

“Do you not know, brothers and sisters—for I am speaking to those who know the law—that the law has authority over someone only as long as that person lives? For example, by law a married woman is bound to her husband as long as he is alive, but if her husband dies, she is released from the law that binds her to him. So then, if she has sexual relations with another man while her husband is still alive, she is called an adulteress. But if her husband dies, she is released from that law and is not an adulteress if she marries another man. So, my brothers and sisters, you also died to the law through the body of Christ, that you might belong to another, to him who was raised from the dead, in order that we might bear fruit for God. For when we were in the realm of the flesh, the sinful passions aroused by the law were at work in us, so that we bore fruit for death. But now, by dying to what once bound us, we have been released from the law so that we serve in the new way of the Spirit, and not in the old way of the written code.” (Rom. 7:1-6)

- Remember, the Law written in stone was cold, rigid, inflexible, and without mercy.
- The Scriptures teach that because of Sinai we were “married to the Law”.

- How would you like to be married to the Law?
- Death, however, can break our bond of marriage to the Law.
- But the Law doesn't die, we do! The Scriptures are clear: **“So, my brothers and sisters, you also died to the law through the body of Christ, that you might belong to another, to him who was raised from the dead, in order that we might bear fruit for God.”**
- Fortunately, Jesus specializes in raising the dead. So once we die to the Law, Jesus is free to resurrect us from death to be His bride.
- Baptism beautifully symbolizes our death, burial, and resurrection (Rom. 6:1-14).
- Paul wrote: **“For through the law I died to the law so that I might live for God. I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me. The life I now live in the body, I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me. I do not set aside the grace of God, for if righteousness could be gained through the law, Christ died for nothing!” (Gal. 2:19-21)**
- While the Law was cold, rigid, inflexible, and without mercy, Jesus is warm, merciful, loving, kind, and forgiving. To which would you rather be married?

JERUSALEM

While the Scriptures do not specifically say so, many scholars believe that the Law was given on Mt. Sinai on the day of Pentecost. Be that as it may, there are some interesting contrasts to be made between the giving of the Law on Mt. Sinai, and the establishment of the church in Jerusalem.

- Both were defining events in the history of God's people.
- At Sinai there was the loud sound of a trumpet (Ex. 19:16). At Jerusalem there was the sound of a violent wind (Acts 2:2).
- At Sinai there were lightening flashes (Ex. 19:16). At Jerusalem there were tongues of fire (Acts 2:3).
- At Sinai they heard the sounds and stood at a distance (Ex. 20:18). At Jerusalem they heard the sounds and came together (Acts 2:6).
- It is significant that at Jerusalem there were devout Jews from every nation under heaven (Acts 2:5). Since it was Pentecost, they were each to bring two loaves of bread from “wherever they lived” (Lev. 23:17). Some suggest these two loaves from all over the world represent Jews and Gentiles coming to Christ. When they offered these first fruits in a wave offering to the Lord it symbolized the unity for which Christ prayed (Jn. 17:21; Eph 2:11-22).
- At Sinai 3,000 died (Ex. 32:28). At Jerusalem 3,000 were saved (Acts 2:41).
- At Sinai they remembered that they were delivered from slavery in Egypt (Deut. 16:12). At Jerusalem they remembered that they were delivered from slavery to the Law (Gal. 3:25).
- Abraham's two wives and two sons are allegories of two covenants. Hagar and Ishmael represent the Old Covenant, Sinai, and slavery. Sarah and Isaac represent the New Covenant, Jerusalem, and freedom (Gal. 4:21-31).

WE ARE INVITED TO JERUSALEM, NOT SINAI

Jesus is called the “image” of the invisible God (Col. 1:15). The Greek word translated as “image” is “eikon” from which we get our English word “icon”. How beautiful! Like the “icon” on your computer, when you click on Jesus you get God!

The passage in Colossians continues: **“For by Him all things were created: things in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or powers or rulers or authorities; all things were created by Him and for Him. He is before all things, and in Him all things hold together” (Col. 1:16,17).** Note that creation involves both things visible, and things invisible!

The book of Hebrews refers to things visible and things invisible to emphasize the contrast between Jewish worship, and Christian worship (Heb. 12:18-24).

In general Jewish worship involved physical things that you could touch! Mt Sinai is a physical mountain and is used to illustrate Jewish worship.

Christianity, by contrast, involves worshipping things invisible. Christians do not come to a mountain you can touch, but to an unseen mountain. Christians come to “Mt. Zion in the heavenly Jerusalem”. This spiritual mountain can only be seen or touched by faith.

Even though the first part of this passage in Hebrews has already been considered, we will repeat it here to emphasize the contrast:

(Jewish worship)

“You have not come to a mountain that can be touched and that is burning with fire; to darkness, gloom and storm to a trumpet blast or to such a voice speaking words that those who heard it begged that no further word be spoken to them, because they could not bear what was commanded: “If even an animal touches the mountain, it must be stoned to death.” The sight was so terrifying that Moses said, “I am trembling with fear.”

(Christian worship)

“But you have come to Mount Zion, to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem. You have come to thousands upon thousands of angels in joyful assembly, to the church of the firstborn, whose names are written in heaven. You have come to God, the Judge of all, to the spirits of the righteous made perfect, to Jesus the mediator of a new covenant, and to the sprinkled blood that speaks a better word than the blood of Abel” (Heb. 12:18-24).

The symbols of Christianity do not involve darkness, gloom, earthquakes, storms, and terror. Christianity involves happy symbols like thousands of angels in joyful assembly and the spirits of righteous people made perfect! Christians even glory in the cross (Gal. 6:14). We can gain insight into this difference by comparing worship in the synagogue and worship in the church. The two, of course, are dramatically different. To try and combine them would be like putting new wine in old skins, or sewing new cloth on an old garment (Mk. 2:21,22).

One obvious difference is that worship in the synagogue involved scourging and torture:

- Jesus warned His disciples that they would be scourged in their synagogues (Matt. 10:17).
- Jesus warned again that the Jews would not only kill, crucify, scourge godly people in their synagogues, they would also pursue them from town to town (Matt. 23:34).

- Saul of Tarsus, as you know, as a devout Jew went from synagogue to synagogue punishing believers and compelling them to blaspheme (Acts 26:10,11).
- The contrast between Judaism and Christianity was on full display in Corinth. Crispus, the ruler of the synagogue, believed in Jesus and was baptized with his whole household. He then left the synagogue and went right next door to the home of Titius Justus to worship with Christians (Acts 18:5-8). A side by side comparison could therefore easily be made. In the synagogue were the screams of those being scourged. Next door were the happy sounds of singing joyful songs with the angels.
- Sosthenes was another ruler in the synagogue in Corinth. When he didn't perform the way the Jews wanted, they beat him in public (Acts 18:17). Such behavior has its roots in Sinai.
- Please note that there are no negative symbols in the Bible regarding Christian worship. Worship in the church in Jerusalem was definitely different from worship of the Jews at Sinai!
- Dire warnings abound, of course, for those who trample on the blood of Jesus (Heb. 10:26-31).

THE INVITATION OF JESUS

Jesus said: **“Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light.”** (Matt. 11:28-30)

The “yoke” of the Law was impossible to bear. At the Jerusalem Council when some wanted to bind the Law on the Gentiles: **“After much discussion, Peter got up and addressed them: ‘Brothers, you know that some time ago God made a choice among you that the Gentiles might hear from my lips the message of the gospel and believe. God, who knows the heart, showed that he accepted them by giving the Holy Spirit to them, just as he did to us. He did not discriminate between us and them, for he purified their hearts by faith. Now then, why do you try to test God by putting on the necks of Gentiles a yoke that neither we nor our ancestors have been able to bear? No! We believe it is through the grace of our Lord Jesus that we are saved, just as they are’”** (Acts 15:7-11).

- Are you weary and burdened? Then come to Jesus!
- Take His yoke and learn from Him. He will labor side by side with you in the same yoke!
- Jesus is gentle and humble in heart.
- When you take His yoke you will learn from Him and find rest for your souls.
- His yoke is easy! His burden is light! Jesus makes yokes that fit perfectly.
- Will you do it? Will you come to Jesus?
- If you have not yet come to Jesus, please do so now!

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