

Mount Sinai

After the Exodus from Egypt, the Lord led His people to Mount Sinai in the wilderness of the northern Arabian peninsula. There, He met with them. He covenanted with the Israelites, taking them as His own adopted son or as His bride, and He constituted them a “Kingdom of priests and a holy nation.” This occurred in 1446 B.C.

The text indicates that Mount Sinai had three discrete regions: an outer one at the base of the mount for the people; another part-way up where Moses, Aaron and his sons, and the elders climbed to confirm the covenant; and the top where the Lord was. All was not well in the camp, though. The people were terrified of the presence of the Lord and demanded that they have a mediator between them and God, instead of being themselves in His presence. So Moses climbed to the top to receive further instructions, laws, and commands from God. While Moses was there, something dreadful took place at the foot of the mount.

Exodus Chapter 32 documents one of the most sordid events of all the Bible’s narratives (although plenty of other events in the Hebrew Scriptures vie for that status). It is agonizing to read this chapter. The people made a statue of a calf out of gold and worshipped it. They willfully, gleefully violated the first two of the Commandments they had just vowed to obey. God sent Moses down to see what the people were doing, and Moses’ outrage erupted. To vindicate that sacred space, Mount Sinai, God had the Levites run back and forth throughout the camp striking down with the sword 3,000 Israelites (presumably the most guilty ones).

Now, let’s go forward in time to Acts Chapter 2 (probably 31 or 33 AD), when Peter presented the Gospel to Jews gathered at Jerusalem. And 3,000 of that crowd responded with faith. Peter had them baptized and, joining the group of disciples, they too received the gift of the Holy Spirit. So I ask, Is it coincidence that at Sinai, 3,000 rebels were cut down with the sword, but after Jesus’ resurrection and ascension, by the preaching of the Word of God (the sword of the Spirit), 3,000 Jews were “cut to the heart” and repented? The number 3,000 is *not* coincidence. Consider the following observations:

- All biblical history seems to be a repeated pattern that goes like this: God initiates something, then failure occurs; then God mitigates or reverses that failure. The initiative is love-based and might be creation and/or blessing in some way, such as a totally new movement in history. The failures always result in judgment of some kind. The reversals involve grace and/or redemption in some way.
- The cyclic nature involves both humans in physical time and space and supernatural beings (Satan and others); the wicked supernatural beings are involved in the failures, sometimes that influence is explicit.
- The entire series of cycles finally ends with a fresh initiative by God, a totally new creation called New Heavens and New Earth, and an ultimate judgment, called hell.
- Evident in biblical history are three major acts or movements: Thus, Act I. is Creation, with the Fall and that initial, primeval civilization; this ends with the Flood narrative and subsequent dispersal. Then Act II., the story of Israel, beginning with the patriarchs, including the exodus, conquest, judges, and monarchy; this ends with the exile. Then Act III., the story of the Son, including the era of the church and the millennial Kingdom; it ends with an ultimate rebellion. A totally new creation ensues. There are significant continuities between the acts. (There’s possible quibble about the exact boundaries between the acts.)
- There also are at least 6 well-defined eras or “dispensations” within the acts: Garden to Flood; Patriarchs; Israel’s beginnings; Israel’s Monarchy; Church; Kingdom. The New Heavens and Earth might be classed as a 7th dispensation. Every dispensation (except the 7th) ends in failure. Failure is ultimately due to the Serpent’s influence and/or the inherent inability of the natural man to obey God.
- God’s entire creation is under a curse and that must be removed and creation renovated to glorify God; and humanity must be radically changed so that humans and a holy God can dwell in each other’s presence. God cannot and will not be present in the life of a natural, unrepentant, un-regenerated person (Romans 8 and elsewhere).
- God is so sovereign over His creation that, while allowing humans a measure of freedom to act, He causes history to fulfill His previously revealed agenda, as documented in the types, prophecies, promises and proleptic events and circumstances of Scripture.

The purpose of these cycles? Probably God’s conflict with evil, in which the physical creation and time and space are the setting, and both humans and the wicked invisible beings are the agents or actors. Within this Scripture-wide story of a dramatic resolution of evil is the additional issue of sin; its origin and precise role is not revealed. Let’s discuss all this.

The event in the Garden (Genesis 1-3) set the pattern that will be followed throughout Scripture. God created, made humans in His image and likeness, and gave them responsibilities. Eden was a mountain and God dwelt at the top. That place, the mount and the garden around it, therefore was sacred space. Their privilege and great blessing was to be in

God's presence. The couple was commanded to serve God by guarding the sacred space and by extending it throughout all the earth. The two were to be a union and procreate, that is generate life. The whole earth thus was to be filled with God's image, with the glory of God. The wicked Serpent, however, entered that sacred space. And Adam failed to fulfill the duty that He owed God of guarding the place. Disaster resulted. So to the rebellion that was on top of failure, sin was added. And God pronounced well-deserved judgment. But in grace, God also promised a future reversal, and as a deposit on that, he covered them with animal skins. A death was needed to resolve that crisis. But the couple was nevertheless not allowed to be in God's presence anymore, proleptic of future exiles.

The same pattern recurs through all Scripture. So prior to Sinai we read the following: The Flood was a judgment on wickedness; that civilization was so evil it had to be dead; the earth had to be washed clean of its violence. After the Flood, the next civilization refused to extend the knowledge and glory of God throughout all the earth, so it was judged too, and God abandoned them to rebelliousness. The Patriarchal era ended with banishment from the Land promised to them, land that would be sacred space because God would dwell there with His people. But due to Jacob's sons' increasing wickedness they had to be thrown off that sacred space. It was a form of exile. Genesis ends reprising how it began. The Exodus reversed the failure of the Patriarchal era. The events in Egypt associated with the Exodus were a judgment upon that land. And death was required – a lamb for the Israelite, a son for the Egyptian. Failure everywhere! At Sinai, the failures of humanity reached a climax.

At Sinai, we should assume (the text doesn't say) that the Serpent inspired the rebellion. Sinai was another Eden, and the new nation of Israel was another Adam. The Levites served God there by purging the community of evildoers, those the demons used. The Levites did what Adam failed to do. The Levites were rewarded for that by having the role from then on to guard sacred space. The Tabernacle was to be a mobile Sinai, cared for by Levites.

After Sinai, the pattern recurs, again and again. The Conquest, the period of the Judges and the Monarchy . . . all these narratives include the same cycles of God initiating some new movement, followed by failure, followed by either a reversal or a promise of one. For the reader of Scripture, the Book of Judges makes this pattern very explicit. During the Monarchy, episodes in the stories of Kings Asa, Josiah, and Hezekiah reprise Sinai. That Sinai episode is repeated throughout the Hebrew Scriptures. And so, at Pentecost, the 3,000 who were saved became themselves sacred space, as the Holy Spirit was given to indwell them. God reversed the failures of Israel at Sinai and all the subsequent Sinai's and began anew. Those 3,000 left Exile and entered into God's presence, into intimate fellowship with Him. So do we today.

The destruction of rebellious Jerusalem in AD 70 reprised Sinai, as will the ghastly Tribulation Period described in the Revelation. In the millennial Kingdom, a holy God will rule all the earth as His sacred space and dwell with His holy people. Not only will the episode in the Garden be reversed, but God will have initiated a totally new movement.

Notice: The Son did not come to earth merely to restore a fallen and failed humanity. The Gospel is therefore not merely that we have the forgiveness of sins. The Son came to remove guilt and reverse past failures, and to defeat all sin and evil, AND (don't miss this!) to initiate a totally new work of God that begins now but will be fulfilled in the future and is open only to those who are repentant and regenerated, transformed by the Spirit and fit to dwell with and to serve a holy God. We declare by how we live in *this* existence (for example, by obedience to His will and loving service, by our changed character, as well as by our trust in His Word) our desire to participate in God's programs. The Son had to make all this possible, but we have to show by our lives that we want to be part of it.

Why do we need to know all this? At least these several reasons. (1) We believers must guard *ourselves*, for we are sacred space. We must eschew sin and worldliness, and be yielded to the Spirit so that we can serve God as He has commanded. We must bring even our *thoughts* captive to Christ. Our radical transformation (discipleship/sanctification) is an absolute imperative to be able to participate in God's great, cosmic programs. (2) We are priests, so we need to serve God by extending His glory all throughout the earth. How? By calling people to Jesus and discipling them. Our message is, in love, God has reversed all failure. It involved a death, but Jesus' death substitutes for our death. He bore the judgment we deserve. So we prepare people to be more "sacred space," that is, for God to dwell in them and thru them to manifest His glory. Fulfilling the Great Commission, doing evangelism, is priestly work (Romans 15:16). The Levitical service of the Church in this era is proleptic of the service of Israel in the future kingdom. And (3), God is doing a very, very big thing in His creation. And we're part of it. We live in an era in which we have the privilege of serving a sovereign God by extending the knowledge of God the Son throughout the world. Jesus defeated the Serpent at the cross, and we participate in that cosmic victory by being like Christ, obedient to God, self-sacrificing, humble, and selflessly loving others as well as God. We all need a fresh vision of God at work in His Creation and our exalted role in it. We've been called to something huge and eternally significant. The best is yet to come, so let's be faithful.