The Promise and the Provocation: The Sinai Narrative

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Following the deliverance from the Red Sea, the Israelites encamped at Sinai, where events would take place that defined them from that period on, such as receiving the law of Moses and the rites associated with the tabernacle. For Latter-day Saints, perhaps even more significant is the event of the provocation, an event that is alluded to in Restoration scripture and that addresses the most profound of religious experiences: entering into the presence of God. Dan Belnap and Andrew Skinner explore the ramifications of the Sinai narrative in this chapter, noting in particular that the promises made to the Israelites then still apply to covenant Israel today. —DB and AS
Set free from Egyptian bondage, the great family of Israel—some six hundred thousand men plus women and children—embarked on their epic wilderness sojourn called the Exodus (Exodus 12:37). In the third month of this religious pilgrimage, they arrived at Mount Sinai (or Horeb) and set up camp. They would stay there for the next eleven months—a period of unprecedented revelation recorded in the rest of the book of Exodus, all of Leviticus, and the first third of Numbers (1:1–10:10). These passages of scripture also happen to be some of the most dense and difficult passages in the Old Testament. Much of the text consists of the law given to the Israelites during their Sinai sojourn as recorded in the three law codes, but these will be discussed elsewhere in this volume. Of significance here is the revelatory experience, comprising Exodus 19–34, that was the foundation of their stay at Sinai. This paper will explore this narrative, in particular, the supernal promise given to the Israelites and conditioned on their obedience, the aftermath of their refusal, and the reinstitution of the covenant.

THE PROMISE

At some point during the third month of their exodus, the Israelites arrived at Sinai, whereupon almost immediately, or so it seems, Moses went up “unto God, and the Lord called unto him out of the mountain” (Exodus 19:3). This event begins what is known in biblical scholarship as the Sinai pericope or Sinai narrative, which comprises Exodus 19–34. It is fronted by Moses’ first meeting and is ended by the reception of the second set of tablets. The challenge of this section is that it appears to have been worked and reworked by unknown redactors.¹ This appears to have muddied the account as to what happened.

The pericope begins with Moses’s interaction with God on Sinai, as described in Exodus 19:1–13. Having ascended Sinai, Moses heard the voice of God, who instructed, “Thus shalt thou say to the house of Jacob, and tell the children of Israel; Ye have seen what I did unto the Egyptians, and how I bare you on eagles’ wings, and brought you unto myself. Now therefore, if ye will obey my voice indeed, and keep my covenant, then ye shall be a peculiar treasure unto me above all people: for all the earth is mine: And ye shall be unto me a kingdom of priests, and an holy nation. These are the words which thou shalt speak unto the children of Israel” (Exodus 19:3–6).

While the overall meaning seems clear—namely, that God was offering the Israelites an opportunity unlike any experienced by any other people or nation—what exactly that offer means is a question that many have. The promise begins with God reminding the Israelites of what he had done up to this point. The first reminder is that they saw “what [he] did unto the Egyptians.” While it would be tempting to think this may have alluded to the destruction of the Egyptian army described in the chapters preceding, the remainder of the verse suggests another focus: “how I bare you on eagles’ wings, and brought you unto myself” (19:4). The divine metaphor of the Israelites being borne “on eagles’ wings” may suggest the swiftness

2–20, who quotes John I. Durham: “Though many helpful observations may be harvested from the critical work of more than a century, the sum total of that work is a clear assertion that no literary solution to this complex narrative has been found, with more than a hint that none is likely to be found.” John I. Durham, *Exodus* (Waco, TX: Word Books, 1984), 259. Speaking of Exodus 19 specifically, Marc Z. Brettler has pronounced the chapter to be “one of the most intractable chapter[s] in the entirety of the Pentateuch in terms of source-critical analysis.” Marc Zvi Brettler, “The Many Faces of God in Exodus 19,” in *Jews, Christians, and the Theology of the Hebrew Scriptures*, ed. Alice Ogden Bellis and Joel S. Kaminsky (Atlanta: Scholars Press for the Society of Biblical Literature, 2000), 353–67, specifically 354. See also Benjamin D. Sommer, “The Source Critic and the Religious Interpreter,” in *Interpretation* 60, no. 1 (2006): 9–20, who discusses the confusion of Exodus 19–20 and examines the supposed role of a later redactor: “In many cases, I am not at all sure that the reactors intended to bury the older voice or to create a unified text. This is very clearly the case in Exodus 19–20, for this text—even in its redacted form—repeatedly presents material ambiguously” (12).
and power by which the children of Israel had been brought to this point, but some suggested that the imagery is not so much one of the power of an eagle but the nurturing nature of such, the terminology reflecting the image of the eagles’ protective wings. Regardless whether the imagery is meant to remind the Israelites of God’s martial deliverance or his nurturing gathering, the point of the reminder is to note how God was explicitly involved in their coming to him. What is emphasized are the Israelites’ relationship with God himself and, more importantly, God’s own desire to bring them to him.

The purpose of the reminder, though, is not just to remind the Israelites of God’s beneficence but to lay the groundwork for his promise: “Now, therefore, if ye will obey my voice indeed, and keep my covenant, then ye shall be a peculiar treasure unto me above all people: for all the earth is mine” (Exodus 19:5). As the grammar suggests, the promise relies on the Israelites’ remembrance of God’s prior actions so that the people may know that the following will happen because of what has already happened. In other words, the children of Israel can trust that their acceptance of the terms will result in them being a “peculiar treasure” because they already know what God has done for them in the past. Their faith and trust in God can be confirmed regarding what he will do because of what he has already done. The protasis of the oath is simple: if they will obey God’s voice and obey his covenant; it is the apodosis of the oath—that they would be a peculiar treasure—that requires them to understand a bit more. The English phrase “peculiar treasure” derives from the Latin peculium, meaning “private property” and is translated from the Hebrew word segullah, meaning “private, acquired treasure.” These terms suggest that the Israelites, via the covenant, were to be understood as God’s highly valued personal treasure.

Further explanation as to what was meant by “peculiar treasure” is given in the next verse: “Ye shall be unto me a kingdom of priests, and an holy nation” (Exodus 19:6). The first of these clauses, a kingdom of priests (or mamleket kohanim) is unique to the Hebrew Bible, and, while the roots of each term is clear, an exact translation of the terms together is more difficult. The first term, mamleket, is the nominative derivative of mlk, or “king”; thus, mamleket is often rendered as “kingdom,” and since the clause itself is possessive, the resulting translation is “kingdom of priests.” But mamleket's position in the clause, as well as the clause's ending, suggests that the term could also be in a constructive clause, meaning that the term serves an adjectival function. In this case, the translation would be “royal priesthood.” This is the manner in which the Septuagint understood the clause. Finally, some early Jewish texts suggest that the two terms represented independent nouns, thus providing a reading of “kings and priests.”

Complicating the translation, at least for some scholars, is whether or not the phrase is to be understood as a literal promise—that Israel would be a nation of priests and kings or a kingdom in which all could be priests—or if the phrase was meant metaphorically—that Israel would be a nation distinct from others because of its privileged status to God. And even if the phrase were to be taken literally, some scholars question whether or not it was meant for all of the Israelites or whether it was specifically designating only the soon-to-be priestly and royal lineages. Biblical scholars Nahum


8. This last question is particularly vexing for those who try to figure out the different sources that supposedly make up the chapter. The emphasis on priestly
Sarna assumed the promise referred specifically to the priests, asserting that “the priest's place and function within society must serve as the ideal model for Israel's self-understanding of its role among the nations. The priest is set apart by a distinctive way of life, . . . dedicated to ministering to the needs of the people.”\(^9\) Of the passage in Exodus, J. C. Rylaarsdam wrote, “The covenant was between Yahweh and his servants,” but then, in a somewhat muddled statement, Rylaarsdam goes on the say, “The covenant is with the people, not with its leaders or priesthood. Just as in Israel the priests had access to the altar and the Levites rejoiced in the service of God, . . . so Israel will fulfill the role of priest in the world. It will be a holy nation, i.e., set apart for a peculiar task. Israel was to be the church.”\(^10\) Unfortunately, as noted, the unique usage of the clause means that there is no other reference in the Bible by which one can compare and get a sense of the manner in which the Bible writers understood it (did it refer to kings and priests, royal priesthood, or kingdom of priests, or did it refer to all the Israelites or only specific classes?), and somewhat surprisingly, Joseph Smith had little to say about this particular phrase.

Regardless of the exact meaning, it is clear that the Israelites were promised a transformation that would make them unique among all nations. Yet the fulfillment of the promise was contingent on the Israelites' acceptance of the agreement, their obedience to the covenant that would beget the promise. The acceptance would be a twofold process: first, the Israelites had to verbally accept the terms, and, second, some recognized physical act by which both parties demonstrated that the new relationship was now in force must be enacted. The first element is recorded in Exodus 19:7–8 as Moses calls the assembly and asks whether they agree to the conditions. With their approval, Moses then ascends Mount Sinai again, formally notifying God of the community’s acceptance. The second element

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of the process, the physical act by which the new relationship is ratified, makes up the next set of instructions from God: “And the Lord said unto Moses, Go unto the people and sanctify them to day and to morrow, and let them wash their clothes, and be ready against the third day: for the third day the Lord will come down in the sight of all the people on mount Sinai” (literally, “YHWH will descend before/to the eyes of all the people”; Exodus 19:10–11). As the instructions suggest, the ratifying event appears to be a visual manifestation of God himself, with preparatory acts to be performed—the washing of clothes and sexual abstinence—for the ratifying act to take place.

Further instruction is given in which Moses is told to set up a boundary around the base of the mountain to prevent anyone from unauthorized ascents, which would lead to death. The boundary was to be in effect until the third day, and the promised manifestation is noted by the end of the instruction: “There shall not an hand touch it, . . . whether it be beast or man, it shall not live: when the trumpet soundeth long, they shall come up to the mount” (Exodus 19:13). With the instruction given, Moses then descends again and prepares his people, sanctifying them for the upcoming theophany. Not surprisingly, there are questions concerning the exact nature of the event, yet the instruction seems pretty straightforward. The ratifying of the new relationship would take place with the children of Israel seeing God in his glory. In sum, Moses’s second trip up Mount Sinai entailed receiving instructions from the Lord on preparing the people to enter his divine presence. The people were to become sanctified (cleansed inwardly and outwardly), were not to treat sacred space casually (but were to show extreme reverence for it, upon penalty of death), and were to refrain from sexual thoughts or actions (which would detract from the absolute sanctity and utter holiness of the experience).

Three days later, the theophanic elements associated with God’s presence took place: the text mentioning the thunder and lightning, the cloud, and most importantly, the “voice” of the trumpet, which, according to the earlier instructions was to mark the time that the Israelites could now ascend the mountain.  

11. The source of the trumpet, whether human or heavenly, is not made clear. In ancient Israel the trumpet, or shofar, could be blown for several reasons: to
nificant experience with the cloud of the Lord. It was, up to that point, the great symbol of God’s divine presence and protection: it had led the children of Israel during their pilgrimage (Exodus 13:21). Yet the narrative now presents a paradox; though the Israelites are at the “nether part of the mount” and ready to ascend, according to Exodus 19:20, only Moses is called up the mountain, and he is told to “go down, charge the people, lest they break through unto the Lord to gaze, and many of them perish” (Exodus 19:21). Having been told that that the Lord would come “before the eyes” of the people, now the selfsame are told that they are not to see God. No reason is given as to why the instructions have changed. The apparent contradiction seems to have troubled the ancient compilers as well.\footnote{In Exodus 19:23, Moses reiterates the boundary injunction sans the temporary marker, thereby implying that the Lord is unaware of what is going on or that he needs an excuse as to the recusal of invitation, which interrupts the flow of the narrative and reads as a later insertion in an attempt to reconcile the contradiction.}

The narrative becomes even more complicated in Exodus 20. The chapter itself opens with Moses’s reception of the Ten Commandments, the implied setting being the same as the end of chapter 19—namely, Moses’s third ascent. Yet the commandments are followed by another call to war (Numbers 10:9; Judges 3:27; 6:34; 1 Samuel 13:3), to warn of an approaching enemy (Hosea 5:8; Ezekiel 33:3), to scare the enemy (Judges 7:19–22), to announce a ceasefire or peace (2 Samuel 18:16), to declare rebellion (2 Samuel 20:1), to celebrate the coronation of the king (1 Kings 1:34, 39), and to praise the Lord (Psalm 98:1–6). The New Testament attests to the sounding of a heavenly trumpet by which God announces his presence or his coming, as 1 Thessalonians 4:16 asserts: “For the Lord himself shall descend from heaven with a shout, with the voice of the archangel, and with the trump of God.” See also Matthew 24:31; 1 Corinthians 15:52. This passage in 1 Thessalonians certainly fits well with the theophany described in Exodus 19, as does Psalm 98. The Lord’s presence was being heralded, and it should be praised. For more on the role of the shofar in ancient Israel, see Filip Vukosavovic, ed., \textit{Sound the Shofar: A Witness to History} (Jerusalem: Bible Lands Museum Jerusalem, 2011), 28.

\footnote{See Sommer, “The Source Critic and the Religious Interpreter,” 13–15. “In Judaism of both the Talmudic era and the Middle Ages we can note a debate concerning the essential nature of revelation at Sinai” (14).}
descriptive scene of the theophany: “And all the people saw the thun-
derings and the lightnings, and the noise of the trumpet, and the moun-
tain smoking” (Exodus 20:18). As with the beginning of the chapter, the
implied timing of this scene is one that follows the initial theophany—that
is, that it describes events of the ongoing divine presence. Yet the remain-
der of the scene suggests this is not a continuation but is a variant to the
theophany as presented in Exodus 19. Following the descriptive elements
in Exodus 20:18, the text states, “And when the people saw it [the the-
ophanic elements], they removed, and stood afar off. And they said unto
Moses, Speak thou with us, and we will hear: but let not God speak with
us, lest we die, . . . and the people stood afar off, and Moses drew near unto
the thick darkness where God was” (20:18–21). As the last set of clauses
suggests, this supposedly later event happened before Moses ascended
the third time. Moreover, it presents an Israelite community that is not
seeking to enter into the presence of God but presents one that is actively
engaged in removing itself from God’s presence. Thus, this second nar-
native is not describing a divine recension of the invitation but is showing
the Israelites’ rejection of the invitation.

Nowhere in the text is there an explicit rejection of the narratives, yet
later references suggest that, at least for some, the second narrative was
understood as the correct one. In Deuteronomy 5, Moses recounts the
Sinaitic narrative, noting that God made a covenant with the Israelites in
Sinai when “the Lord talked with [the Israelites] face to face in the mount
out of the midst of fire” (5:4). Yet this is immediately followed by this state-
ment: “I stood between the Lord and you at that time, to show you the
word of the Lord for ye were afraid by reason of the fire, and went not
up into the mount” (5:5). Both verses suggest that the children of Israel
were to come before God “face to face,” as the text states, but they did not,
instead sending Moses in their stead, with the mention that they refused

the ambiguous relationship of this scene with the earlier scenes in chapter 19
is the result of later redactors deliberately confusing the scene: “The final form
of this text wants the audience to be perplexed. . . . The relative places of God,
Moses, and Israel at the most important moment of Israel’s history are a matter
of dispute in the final form of Exodus—aggressively, insistently so.”
to go up, a clear allusion to the Exodus 20 narrative. Deuteronomy 18 also alludes to the Exodus 20 version as part of the Mosaic prophecy, comprising Deuteronomy 18:15–19. Verse 16 describes the new prophet in terms of the Sinaitic Moses, whom “thou desiredst of the Lord thy God in Horeb [Sinai] in the day of the assembly, saying, Let me not hear again the voice of the Lord my God, neither let me see this great fire any more, that I die not.” As in the earlier Deuteronomic reference, it is the Israelites’ refusal to experience God’s presence that is mentioned, not the supposed contradictory instruction.

Psalm 95 appears to allude to the event and introduces language that will be later associated with the event: “Harden not your heart, as in the provocation, and as in the day of temptation in the wilderness: when your fathers tempted me, proved me, and saw my work. Forty years long was I grieved with this generation, and said, It is a people that do err in their heart, and they have not known my ways: unto whom I sware in my wrath that they should not enter into my rest” (Psalm 95:8–11). Though Sinai is not mentioned, the psalmist notes an event that can be referred to as “the provocation.” This term is a translation of the Hebrew word מְרִיבָה, which

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14. Moshe Weinfeld, Deuteronomy 1–11, Anchor Bible Commentary 5 (New York: Doubleday, 1991), 241: “In v 4 it was said that God spoke on the mountain out of the fire. The glossator comes to harmonize this with the old tradition. In agreement with Exod 20:15 that ‘the people fell back and stood at a distance’, the glossator adds here that the people did not ascend the mountain out of fear. According to another tradition (?), the people were prohibited from ascending the mountain (Exod 19:12, 21, 24; cf. 34:3) in order to prevent their ‘seeing’ the Deity, but this is not in line with Deuteronomy, which never speaks of ‘seeing’ God, but only of ‘hearing’ him.” The actual terminology in verse 4 is “פָּנִים בִּפְנֵי” (literally “face in face”). The more common form of the phrase is “פָּנִים ’ל פָּנִים” (“face to face”). While most agree that technically the terminology suggests direct visual interaction, most assume that it should be understood as metaphorical, since the Israelites never did see God. See Jeffrey J. Tigay, The JPS Torah Commentary–Deuteronomy (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1996), 61. Weinfeld suggests that the unique phrasing reflects a deliberate change from פָּנִים ’ל פָּנִים to פָּנִים בִּפְנֵי to harmonize with the later, Deuteronomic principle mentioned above, namely that no one can see God (239–40). In any case, it appears that the later tradition understood that the Israelites were supposed to have had direct interactions with God in some manner.
is often associated with a particular event—namely, the Israelites’ provoking of the Lord for water at the site that would eventually be called Meribah. Yet the term’s relationship in Psalm 95 with the “day of temptation in the wilderness” means that it could be used to describe any number of events in which the children of Israel provoked God, including one that will be discussed later in this study—namely, the construction of the golden calf.\(^\text{15}\)

Yet the term appears to also allude directly to the Sinai variant in Exodus 20, since the verb *nasah* is used in the psalm (“when your fathers *tempted* me,” Psalm 95:9; emphasis added) and in Exodus 20:20 (“fear not: for God is come *to prove* you”; emphasis added). Found some thirty-six times in the Hebrew Bible, the term is also used in Exodus 20:19 after the assembly’s declaration that they wished for Moses to go up the mountain for them, “lest [they] die.” Moses responds to their request, stating, “Fear not. In order to test (*nasah*) you he comes; his “fear” will be on your faces so that you do not sin” (Exodus 20:20, author’s translation).\(^\text{16}\)

Perhaps the most intriguing addition to the narrative, though, is the last verse of Psalm 95, which notes that the “provocation” (v. 8) led the Lord to “sware in [his] wrath” that the Israelites would not enter into God’s “rest” (v. 11). What is meant by God’s rest is not clear from the context, the psalm assuming that the reader grasps the meaning. The concept of “rest” is associated with the Sinai and wilderness narratives. In Exodus 33:14, as part of his promise to Moses concerning the future state of the Israelites, God promises, “My presence [literally, ‘my face’] will walk [presumably with the Israelites], and I will cause you to have rest” (author’s translation). In this instance, “rest” is associated with the future settlement of the children of Israel after their wandering in the wilderness or the reception of

\(^{15}\) Catherine M. Thomas, “The Provocation in the Wilderness and the Rejection of Grace” in *Sperry Symposium Classics: The Old Testament*, ed. Paul Y. Hoskisson (Provo, UT: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University; Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2005), 165: “The Provocation refers not only to the specific incident at Meribah but to a persistent behavior of the children of Israel that greatly reduced their spiritual knowledge. . . . After a succession of provocations, the Israelites in time rejected and lost the knowledge of . . . the great plan of grace inherent in the doctrine of the Father and the Son.”

their “inheritance.” This is the same way in which “rest” is used in various other scriptures (Numbers 14:23; Deuteronomy 3:20; 12:9,10; 25:19). In these instances, “rest” is understood as the cessation of conflict with Israelites’ neighbors that will accompany the Israelites’ settlement into the promised land. The same meaning is associated with “rest” in Joshua, and both references discuss the rest given to the Israelites. Yet the rest in Psalm 95 is God’s rest. In other words, Psalm 95 suggests that the children of Israel could have entered into God’s own rest.

Divine rest is often associated with the Creation narrative, with divine rest marking not the cessation of conflict but the cessation of creative organization. Outside of the Creation accounts, divine rest is also associated with the presence of God in his temple. Psalm 132:8 invites God to arise and come into his rest, along with the ark, while in verses 13–14, the reader is told that God chose Zion for his “habitation,” saying, “This is my rest for ever: here will I dwell; for I have desired it.” In a similar manner, in Isaiah 18:4, God’s rest is associated with his dwelling place, whereas in Isaiah 66, God’s resting place is paralleled with his house. The verbal form is also associated with the immanence of God’s presence with both the cloud and God’s spirit resting at certain places and on certain individuals. If this rest is what was meant in Psalm 95, then the provocation, in which the Israelites rejected God’s invitation to enter his presence led to a divine decree that they would not enter into his rest, presumably in the foreseeable future.

Outside of these references, the Sinai narrative is not alluded to in the Old Testament. Yet intriguingly, Psalms 95 is alluded to in Hebrews 3–4. Noting that Christians could enter the Lord’s rest if they held “fast the confidence and the rejoicing of the hope firm unto the end,” the writer of Hebrews then cited Psalm 95: “Wherefore (as the Holy Ghost saith: To day if ye will hear his voice, Harden not your hearts, as in the provocation, in the day of temptation in the wilderness: When your fathers tempted me, proved me, and saw my works forty years. Wherefore I was grieved with that generation, and said, they do always err in their heart and they have not known my ways. So I sware in my wrath, they should not enter into my rest)” (Hebrew 3:6–11).
Though not an exact quote, being couched in first person rather than third person, this Hebrews passage is clearly an allusion to Psalm 95. As for the allusion, it appears that the writer of Hebrews believed that the invitation associated with the narrative, to enter into God’s presence, was in effect for the early Christian community as shown in Hebrews 4, which opens with a warning: “Let us therefore fear, lest, a promise being left us of entering his rest, any of you should seem to come short of it” (4:1). This concern is repeated a few verses later, where having demonstrated that there must be a rest that one could enter, the Hebrews writer exhorts: “Let us labour therefore to enter into that rest, lest any man fall after the same example of unbelief” (4:11). As to what that rest is, or what entering into that rest may mean, the remainder of the chapter establishes the preeminence of Christ as high priest, who made it possible for all that believe to “come boldly unto the throne of grace” (4:16); thus, the implication of the Lord’s rest is having his presence in the temple.

As for the Sinai narrative, it too is alluded to in Hebrews. Beginning in Hebrews 12:18, the Christian is told that “ye are not come unto the mount that might be touched, and that burned with fire, nor unto blackness, and darkness, and tempest, and the sound of the trumpet, and the voice of words; which voice they that heard entreated that the word should not be spoken to them any more (for they could not endure that which was commanded ” (Hebrews 12:18–20). The allusions are clear: the theophanic elements, the trumpet sound, the entreaty to Moses that he meet with God, and so forth, all point to Exodus 20. Yet, significantly, the believer is told that this was not to be the experience. Instead, the ideal experience was one in which one would “come unto mount Sion, and unto the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, and to an innumerable company of angels, to the general assembly of the church of the firstborn, . . . and to God the Judge of all, and to the spirits of just men made perfect, and to Jesus the Mediator of the new covenant” (Hebrews 12:22–24).

The excerpt concludes with the injunction “see that ye refuse not him that speaketh, . . . for our God is a consuming fire” (Hebrews 12:25, 29). As the final exhortation makes clear, this later Christian interpretation of the narrative appears to have assumed that the events of Exodus 20 described
the Israelites’ refusal of God’s invitation to enter into his presence and engage with the divine community.

This understanding of the Sinai narrative is reinforced by Restoration scripture. Jacob alludes to the provocation while defending the ministerial work of himself and the other ecclesiastical leaders. Using language first used by his older brother Nephi, Jacob stated, “We labored diligently among our people, that we might persuade them to come unto Christ, and partake of the goodness of God, that they might enter into his rest, lest by any means he should swear in his wrath they should not enter in, as in the provocation in the days of temptation while the children of Israel were in the wilderness” (Jacob 1:7). Though the similar phrase “to come unto him [Christ] and partake of his goodness” can be found earlier in 2 Nephi 26:23, the use of language similar to Psalm 95 suggests that Jacob is comparing himself and the others to Moses, who, presumably, also taught his people to come unto God and partake of his goodness. Doing so, according to Jacob, would allow one to enter into the rest of God—Jacob’s declaration implying that this is precisely what the Israelites did not do, again suggesting that the Exodus 20 narrative and its portrayal of the Israelites rejecting God is the correct interpretation.  

The entering into God’s rest takes on a cosmic perspective in Alma 12, where provocation and Sinai narrative language are both used, but in the context of the Garden of Eden narrative and the plan of salvation as a whole. Beginning in verse 32, Alma the Younger explains that, following the Fall of Adam and Eve, a second set of commandments were given since the first set given in the Garden of Eden could no longer be met: “But God did call on men, in the name of his Son (this being the plan of redemption which was laid) saying: If ye will repent, and harden not your hearts, then will I have mercy upon you, through mine Only Begotten Son; therefore whosoever repenteth, and hardeneth not his heart, he shall have claim

17. The similarity between Jacob 1:7 and Psalm 95:8 may suggest that at least some of the psalms were a part of the brass plates. See John Hilton III, “Old Testament Psalms in the Book of Mormon,” in Ascending the Mountain of the Lord: Temple, Praise, and Worship in the Old Testament ed. David Rolph Seely, Jeffrey R. Chadwick, and Matthew J. Grey (Provo, UT: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University; Salt Lake City; Deseret Book, 2013), 291-311.
through mine Only Begotten Son, unto a remission of his sins; and these shall enter into my rest. And whosoever will harden his heart, and will do iniquity, behold, I swear in my wrath that he shall not enter into my rest” (Alma 12:33–35). In this instance, the promise associated with the Sinai narrative becomes the promise associated with the plan of salvation; the invitation defining all humankind following the Fall. Alma continues his theological usage of the provocation, observing,

My brethren, behold, I say unto you, that if ye will harden your hearts ye shall not enter into the rest of the Lord; therefore your iniquity provoketh him that he sendeth down his wrath upon you as in the first provocation, yea, according to his word in the last provocation as well as the first, to the everlasting destruction of your souls. . . . Seeing we know these things, and they are true, let us repent, and harden not our hearts, that we provoke not the Lord our God to pull down his wrath upon us in these his second commandments which he has given unto us; but let us enter into the rest of God. (Alma 12:36–37)

As in the verses prior, Alma appears to have equated the Fall as a provocation, even the first provocation, which brought about the second commandments; his second provocation apparently being the mortal experience overall.

Christ himself alludes explicitly to God’s rest—associating it directly with the Exodus 19 event—in his discourse on the gospel as recorded in 3 Nephi 27. In verse 19, Christ posits that “no unclean thing can enter into [God’s] kingdom; therefore nothing entereth into his rest save it be those who have washed their garments in my blood.” The context is of a cosmic event rather than the event of entering God’s presence at Sinai, yet the requirements to entering into this rest by having one’s garments washed in the blood of Christ is similar to the original Sinaitic instruction to wash one’s clothes in preparation for the theophany that would take place three days later.

Yet Doctrine and Covenants 84 contains perhaps the most explicit Latter-day Saint text alluding to the events in Exodus 19 and 20. Received in 1832, the revelation addressed the nature of the priesthood, noting that
the “greater priesthood administereth the gospel and holdeth the keys of the mysteries of the kingdom” and that one of those keys referred to is “the key of the knowledge of God” (Doctrine and Covenants 84:19). The next verse suggests that it is the priesthood ordinances, or physical acts, by which this knowledge could be acquired. With both the ordinances and priesthood authority, one could “see the face of God . . . and live” (verse 22). Having established this principle, Joseph was then told, “Now this Moses plainly taught to the children of Israel in the wilderness, and sought diligently to sanctify his people that they might behold the face of God; But they hardened their hearts and could not endure his presence; therefore, the Lord in his wrath, for his anger was kindled against them, swore that they should not enter into his rest while in the wilderness, which rest is the fulness of his glory” (verses 23–24).

While this passage contains similar terminology to phrases found in Psalm 95 (“harden not your heart,” “his wrath,” “not enter into his rest”), the event itself—the Israelites’ refusal to enter into God’s presence—is clearly the Exodus 19–20 narrative. As for the nature of God’s rest, it appears that it indicates entering into the direct presence of God.

THE TABERNACLE

Yet, even as the Israelites rejected this great blessing, the revealed law to Moses provided another avenue by which they could enter into the presence of God—the tabernacle. Here we must turn to latter-day revelation

18. As noted later, Joseph placed God’s injunction to the Israelites concerning his rest at the end of the golden calf narrative, thus there appears to be a possible discrepancy between the placement of the injunction. The confusion may be alleviated by noting that in the JST text of Exodus 34:1–2, when God references the injunction, it is implied that it had already taken place: “But I will give unto them the law as at the first, but it shall be after the law of a carnal commandment; for I have sworn in my wrath, that they shall not enter into my presence, into my rest” (emphasis added). Thus, the two versions may be reconciled with the Exodus 34 version referring to an earlier event, which is not mentioned by name. It should also be noted that the JST injunction version was received sometime in 1830–31, while Doctrine and Covenants 84 was received in 1832, thus it may reflect a later, amended understanding of the overall narrative.
in order to comprehend the full purpose of the tabernacle as Jehovah originally planned. To Joseph Smith the Lord offered this profound insight: “And again, verily I say unto you, how shall your washings be acceptable unto me, except ye perform them in a house which you have built to my name? For, for this cause I commanded Moses that he should build a tabernacle, that they should bear it with them in the wilderness, and to build a house in the land of promise, that those ordinances might be revealed which had been hid from before the world was” (Doctrine and Covenants 124:37–38). Joseph associated these ordinances with our temple rites today. In August of 1843, while discussing the “3 grand orders of the priesthood,” the Prophet noted that the law governing the Melchizedek Priesthood had been taught to Moses was “a perfect law of Theocracy,” which Joseph Smith associated with becoming a king and priest.¹⁹

Unfortunately, this insight is not as clear cut in the biblical text itself. Following the reception of the “social” law, which comprises Exodus 20–23, Exodus 24 records an event in which “Moses wrote all the words of the Lord” (24:4), built an altar, erected twelve pillars (each one representing one of the tribes of Israel), and offered sacrifices wherein the blood of the sacrifices were splashed on the altar and the people. As will be discussed later, these rites initiated the Israelites into a covenant relationship with God. Following this, Moses, Aaron, Aaron’s sons, and seventy of the elders of Israel ascended the mountain, where they “saw the God of Israel” (24:10–11). Verse 12 then records Moses being called up the mountain (again) to be given “tables of stone and a law, and commandments.”

At first blush, the event appears to contradict the events recorded in Exodus 19–20—namely, that no one but Moses can see God. As with the earlier sequence, this may reflect different versions of the entire Sinai narrative.²⁰ Yet Joseph suggested another possibility. In May of 1843, he

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²⁰. Alexander, “Composition of the Sinai Narrative,” 7: “It should be noted that previous attempts to uncover the sources underlying this section [Ex. Xxic 1–11] have not proved particularly satisfactory.” For more, see Walter A. Maier, “The Analysis of Exodus 24, According to Modern Literary, Form, and Redactional Critical Methodology,” in Springfielder 37, no. 1 (1973): 35–52; see also E. W.
delivered a sermon in which he noted a difference between seeing God and engaging directly with him: “It is one thing to be on the Mount and hear the excellent voice &c &c and another to hear the voice declare to you, you have a part and lot in the kingdom.”21 In light of the quote, it is possible that what was being recorded was the two different types of divine experiences: the event in Exodus 19–20 offering direct interaction with God to all of the Israelites and the lesser event in Exodus 24 in which one saw God. In any case, following the visual experience, Moses is again called up to the mountain and receives the next set of instructions concerning Aaron and the construction, dedication, and sanctification of the tabernacle.

These plans comprise chapters 25–31 of Exodus, while the report of the actual construction is found in chapters 35–40 and the dedication and initiation takes place in Leviticus 8–9. As to the tabernacle’s intended function, the Lord’s own words reiterate his plan to dwell among the people, mentoring them and guiding them to become the holy nation and kingdom of priests that he had proposed in the very beginning of their encampment at Sinai. To Moses the Lord declared, “And let them make me a sanctuary; that I may dwell among them” (Exodus 25:8).

Though verse 8 suggests that the tabernacle was meant to house God, another term commonly used for the tabernacle throughout the Pentateuch is ʿohel môēd, or the tent of meeting/the congregation. In light of this, it may be more accurate to view the tabernacle as more of a temporary meeting place rather than as a permanent dwelling place of God. Recognizing the tabernacle as a meeting place suggests that the purpose of the tabernacle was to facilitate the interaction between the visiting parties, God and humankind. Thus, the tabernacle space represented a place that was neither in the mortal world nor in the divine world, but a liminal

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space that was specifically designed for interaction by parties from both worlds.\footnote{22}

Just as with today’s temples, many aspects of the tabernacle, both functional and symbolic, highlighted its liminal nature, though not always in an obvious way. For instance, all of the entrances associated with the tabernacle, such as the gate, the entrance into the tabernacle proper, and the veil separating the Holy Place from the Holy of Holies, were distinguished from the surrounding cloth by their coloration, having been dyed in blue, scarlet, and purple. Any explicit meaning behind this selection of colors is unknown because the text gives no indication of their significance, but they clearly distinguished these spaces from other spaces in the tabernacle. Besides the colors, these spaces also shared a similar function—to mark where one could enter and leave. The color pattern set these spaces apart and highlighted their unique function.\footnote{23}

\begin{itemize}
\item \footnote{22} Such spaces, neither fully in one state nor another but straddling both, are known as liminalities, or liminal spaces, so named from the Latin \textit{limen}, meaning “doorway” or “threshold.” Significantly, these spaces are not meant to be permanent but are merely transition points where individuals can interact in ways not possible in regular spaces because of physical or social limitations, or where individuals can prepare one to move from one social state to another. Though the term \textit{liminality} may be new to readers, if they are temple-attending Latter-day Saints, they are quite familiar with the concept. When a Saint speaks of attending the temple as leaving the world temporarily in order to commune with God and reemerging stronger and more powerful than before, such language reflects the liminal nature of the temple, both in practice and in space.

\item \footnote{23} While there is no explicit explanation to these colors provided in the text, they do appear elsewhere in the Bible. All three are noted as colors associated with clothing worn by well-to-do individuals, including royalty. They are also incorporated in cloth assigned to cover the items of the tabernacle when the camp of Israel was moving. According to Numbers 4, the ark was to be covered by the veil, then a layer of badger skin, then a cloth of blue; the table of shewbread was covered in blue, then scarlet cloth, then badger skin. The menorah, the altar of incense, and the other items used in the sanctuary itself were covered in blue cloth, followed by a layer of badger cloth. The altar of burnt offering was to be covered in purple cloth, then badger skin. Unfortunately, while it is clear what the Israelites were expected to do, why they were to do it in this manner or what the symbolism meant in doing it this way is not clear. It is intriguing that of the colors themselves, two of them, the red and the blue are primary colors, while the purple is a blend of both, but while it is fun to speculate on the theological
\end{itemize}
Blue, scarlet, and purple were also dominant in the clothing worn by the priest. The association of the priest with these colors suggests that the priest was a liminal figure, one who moved between the different states and whose purpose was to facilitate such movement, which in fact, is exactly what the priest did. The same colors also appeared on the innermost linen layer of the tabernacle, which was also embroidered with gold filament in the image of cherubim (Exodus 26:31). The presence of the same color scheme that was, as previously shown, associated with liminality, suggests that the rooms surrounded by this material were liminal spaces that differed from the reality outside of the tent—spaces specifically dedicated to direct interaction between God and mortals.

Besides the color scheme, the types and functions of items found within the sanctuary may also have emphasized the liminal nature of the tabernacle proper. The sanctuary itself was divided into two rooms by the veil, of which the larger of the two possessed only three items: the menorah, the table of the bread of the presence, and the altar of incense—all three either made of pure gold or covered in gold (Exodus 26:33–35); and while all three may have had cosmic significance, it is also noteworthy that each served a mundane, domestic function. Thus, while the menorah may have represented the cosmic tree, functionally its purpose was to provide


24. Philip Peter Jenson, Graded Holiness: A Key to the Priestly Conception of the World, Journal for the Study of the Old Testament Supplement Series 106 (Sheffield, UK: Sheffield Academic Press, 1992), 103: “The predominance of gold in the Tabernacle can be related to its valued physical properties and great social significance. This is the basis for the analogies which are made between the human and divine spheres, and a close connection between gold, divinity, and holiness is evident throughout the ancient Near East. Gold is rare, desirable, and very costly, and fittingly represents the dignity and power of those who are able to possess it, to a pre-eminent degree, God.”
light within the room like any other lamp. Similarly, the table of the presence, so named for the bread that was placed on the table and replaced every Sabbath, was, functionally, simply a table with food on it. Even the incense altar appears to have had a domestic analogue, as both texts and archaeological evidence suggest that private households used incense.


26. While the burning of incense within domestic spaces may have had religious implications, it also appears that it burned to make the home a more pleasing place to be. See Seymour Gitin, “The Four-Horned Altar and Sacred Space: An Archaeological Perspective,” in Sacred Time, Sacred Space, 95–123 (108 specifically). See also C. Houtman, “On the Function of the Holy Incense (Exodus XXX 34–8) and the Sacred Anointing Oil (Exodus XXX 22–33),” Vetus Testamentum 42, no. 4 (1992): 458–65: “As incense was burnt in the houses of the well-to-do to create a pleasant atmosphere, and as the purity of the aromatics and the exquisite character of the fragrance indicated the status of their residents, so the incense of the sanctuary also was a symbol of status” (463). The burning of incense was also associated with hospitality. See Béatrice Caseau, “Eudoia: The Use and Meaning of Fragrances in the Ancient World and Their Christianization (100–900 AD)” (PhD diss., Princeton University, 1994), which may be a useful worldview to understand the role of the tabernacle. See Robert Ignatius Letellier, Day in Mamre, Night in Sodom: Abraham and Lot in Genesis 18 and 19, Biblical Interpretation Series 10 (Leiden: Brill, 1995), 155: “In nomadic societies of the ancient Middle East hospitality to a stranger was a sacred obligation, a manifestation of social graciousness that touches the deepest values. . . . The guest is sacred and it is an honour to provide for [the guest].” For more on ancient Near Eastern hospitality, see Andrew Arterbury, Entertaining Angels: Early Christian Hospitality in its Mediterranean Setting (Sheffield, UK: Sheffield Phoenix Press, 2005); Jean-Jacques Glassner, “L’hospitalité en Mésopotamie ancienne: aspect de la question de l’étranger,” in Zeitschrift fur Assyriologie und vorderasiatische Archologie 80, no. 1 (1990): 60–75; Michael Herzfeld, “As in Your Own House: Hospitality, Ethnography, and the Stereotype of Mediterranean Society,” in Honor and Shame and the Unity of the Mediterranean, ed. David D. Gilmore (Washington, DC: American Anthropological Association, 1987), 75–89; Robert C. Stallman, “Divine Hospitality in the Pentateuch: A Metaphorical Perspective on God as Host” (PhD diss., Westminster Theological Seminary, 1999).
The principle of liminality continued as one moved beyond the Holy Place to the veil, which separated the Holy Place from the Holy of Holies. The veil was similar to the other cloth items, being made of fine linen embroidered with purple, scarlet, and blue thread. Yet, unlike the other cloth items associated with ingress and egress (the other “doors”), the veil also included images of cherubim similar to those on the innermost roof covering. Thus, when in the holy room, cherubim images could be seen on the ceiling and on the eastern “wall.” While we are not told specifically why the cherubim were to be incorporated into these demarcations of space, cherubim are found elsewhere in the Old Testament, and their functions within these other texts may provide insight into their presence in the tabernacle. Their first function in these texts is to guard selected space. In Genesis, cherubim are placed before the tree of life to keep Adam and Eve from eating of the fruit. Thus, the presence of the cherubim demarcates the garden into at least two sections: the part that possesses the tree of life and the part with the rest of the garden.

Another function associated with the cherubim is that of movement. First Samuel 4:4 is the first reference to speak of God as sitting between cherubim, a concept repeated a number of times in the Old Testament, culminating in the writings of Ezekiel, where the cherubim are depicted not only as beings that surround God but also as beings that bear him from place to place.27 Not only did the cherubim serve to mark the space in which one could interact with God, but their presence also signified that the space was not permanent. Thus, the embroidered cherubim images on the veil would have indicated that liminal nature of the veil. The verb used to describe the function of the veil itself, *hibdil*, appears to be a specialized term used almost exclusively in the priestly literature to describe the separating or the ordering of the different elements of the Creation—light from dark, upper waters from lower waters, day from night—which in turn reflected the creation of the social cosmos (the separation of man and

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woman, the separation of child from parent, the establishment of marriage, and the ability to discern or categorize between good and evil). 28

The final element associated with liminality was the Holy of Holies itself. As in the Holy Place, the roof—which draped over the northern, southern, and western sides—was made of blue, scarlet, and purple cloth with cherubim embroidery, as was the eastern wall, or veil. Thus, the Holy of Holies was completely surrounded by cloth marked with liminal symbolism, suggesting that the space within, the room itself, was wholly liminal space. In terms of furniture, the room possessed only the ark of the covenant (also known as the ark of the testimony), and the lid for the ark, or the mercy seat. The ark was a wooden box encased in gold, about two and a half feet in length and one and a half feet in both width and height. It contained the two tablets of stone upon which was written by God himself the law of God, as well as a pot of manna. 29 The mercy seat consisted of two cherubim with wings that touched each other, thus creating an open-air enclosure on top of the ark. 30

28. *bdl*, in *TDOT*, 2:1–3: “*bdl* is used in a typical way in the Priestly account of creation (Gen. 1:4, 6, 7, 14, 18): the individual phases in creation are depicted as a separation of the different elements form one another. . . . The author uses the word *bdl* in order to emphasize a major idea in the Priestly account of creation, viz., that the creator-God is a God of order rather than a mythological procreator” (2). The use of the verb suggests that the veil may have also represented the ongoing nature of the creation, as well as the distinction between mortal and divine spheres. Elsewhere in the scriptures, God’s heavenly abode is described as a tent, with the “curtains stretched out still” suggesting that the cosmos was architecturally represented by the tabernacle (Moses 7:30; see also Psalm 104:2–3; Isaiah 40:22, 42:5; Jeremiah 10:12). Yet the irony of this separation is that as the cosmos was divided, it became more and more possible for humanity and God to interact more fully. Thus, the separation of the Holy Place and the Holy of Holies by the veil, a representation of the order and organization of the cosmos, also represents the coming together of the divine and mortal worlds.

29. Numbers 17:10–11 notes that Aaron’s blossoming rod, the indicator of his chosen status as high priest, was also placed in the ark. The rod is also mentioned in Hebrews 9:4, along with the tablets and a pot of manna.

30. Parallels from other ancient descriptions of royal thrones indicate that the divine cherubim themselves formed the throne of Jehovah. For example, a carved relief on the stone coffin of Ahiram, king of Byblos, a Phoenician city
As mentioned, one of the designations for the ark is the ark of the testimony. The Hebrew term translated as “testimony” in this case indicates the establishment of a relationship between two parties.\footnote{ya‘ād, TDOT, 6:135–44. This is also the root for mo‘ēd, the term translated as tent of “meeting.”} The two items—the stone tablets given to Moses and the pot of manna—placed in the ark emphasize this function in that they represent two items that God himself provided to facilitate the relationship between him and the Israelites. The tablets of stone contained the moral or ethical precepts by which the Israelites could be made holy and therefore enter into his presence, while the manna represented the means by which God interacted directly in the people’s livelihood. The presence of the manna and the stone tablets—representing God’s contribution to the God-Israel relationship—coupled with the presence of the cherubim—representing the liminal nature of the space in the tabernacle—lead us to the supernal reason given as to why the Israelites should have a tabernacle: so that God could dwell among them. God’s express desire to be among his people demonstrates a mortal-divine relationship that did not exist in other religions of the ancient Near East.\footnote{For the Mesopotamian perspective, see Jean Bottéro, Religion in Ancient Mesopotamia, trans. Teresa Lavender Fagan (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001): “The divinity was never the object of an anxious, enthusiastic pursuit: ‘to seek out (šē‘u) a god,’ as was sometimes said, was out of a need for his protection, his assistance. It was not inspired by a desire to be close to him, to be in his presence, to have the peace or happiness of finding oneself in his company. Hymns professing a bottomless desire for a god’s presence indicate admiration (as in the case of the moon god, the splendid lamp of the night) and not an impatience to get closer to him. . . . One submitted to them, one feared them, one bowed down and trembled before them: one did not ‘love’ or ‘like’ them. . . . [Temples] were not only to shelter them but to isolate them in peace and allow them to lead, separately and among themselves, a peaceful and refined existence in a magnificent solemn place where their subjects knew they could be found and admire them, take care of them, and request their benevolent...}
There, in the ultimate liminal space of the Holy of Holies, one confronted tangible symbols of God’s effort and desire to be among his people. The entire tabernacle structure and attendant items culminated in the revelation that God himself desired interaction with them, while the emphasis on liminality highlighted the reality of mortal-divine relationships, which in turn elucidated the true worth of God and humans.

“TO MAKE ATONEMENT”

This relationship was also expressed in the primary actions associated with the tabernacle and was alluded to in the instructions—sacrifice and anointing, both of which were performed in Exodus 24 and in the dedication event. The instructions of these ritual actions make up sizable portions of Exodus, Leviticus, and Numbers and can be difficult to follow and appreciate. The first of three primary forms of offerings was the burnt offering, or the ʿolāh offering (derived from the Hebrew ʿalah, meaning “to ascend”); the Hebrew designation reflects the nature by which this offering ascends into the divine realm, and the English designation reflects that the entire animal or offering is burnt. The instructions concerning the

aid” (37, 115). For the Egyptian perspective, see Erik Hornung, Conceptions of God in Ancient Egypt: The One and the Many, trans. John Bains (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1982), 197–8, 205, 207: “The first emotion that grips an Egyptian who encounters a deity or the image of a god is fear, mixed with wonder and exultation. . . . The gods created the world and ensure[d] that not only [hu]mankind but all beings can live and grow in it. But to what end? What made the creator god call the world and all its creatures into being and keep them in being? No Egyptian text is known which gives direct, unambiguous answers to questions of this sort: the Egyptians evidently did not consider these to be serious issues. . . . The Egyptians believed that by performing the cult and presenting themselves before the god they were at least increasing his existence and presence, while also keeping his negative, dangerous side at a distance. Cult actions do not coerce but they do encourage the gods to show their gracious side—for the converse of a god’s love on [hu]mankind his violent aspect, which is always present beneath the surface and must be assuaged by means of appropriate cult services. . . . The Egyptians evidently never experience a longing for union with the deity. They keep their distance from the gods, whom no one can approach too closely without being punished.”
performance of the burnt offering in Leviticus 1 begins with the requirements for the offering itself. The ideal offering was a male without blemish. The offering had to be offered voluntarily, meaning that the offerer willingly chose to be a part of the ritual process and was not forced to participate. That the offerer was a willing participant in the ritual process is significant and suggests that the efficacy of the rite was tied to the willingness of all participants. Upon presentation at the tabernacle, the offerer placed a hand on the head of the animal, an act repeated in each ritual offering, at which point the reader was told: “and it shall be accepted for him to make atonement for him” (Leviticus 1:4). Following the placement of the hand, the animal’s blood could be used to make an atonement. The animal was slaughtered and divided into sections, and some parts were immediately put on the altar (the head and the fat), while others were first washed. The blood was collected and splashed around the base of the altar.

The second type of offering was the sin offering, and its performance closely resembled that of the burnt offering, except instead of the blood being poured at the base of the altar, some of the blood of the sin offering was to be smeared on certain objects of the tabernacles. When performing this rite on behalf of the whole Israelite congregation, the priest splashed the blood seven times before the veil separating the Holy Place from the inner Holy of Holies. The priest then took the blood and smeared it on the horns or corners of the altar of incense in the Holy Place that stood before the veil, pouring the remaining blood at the base of the altar of burnt offerings outside. The placing of the hand on the forehead would suggest that the animal was not a substitute but represented the individual, and thus its blood could be used to effect what atonement was necessary in a positive manner for the participant. Like the burnt offering, the sin offering was also used to “make atonement.”

The term *atonement* was first used in a theological sense by William Tyndale.\(^33\) Literally meaning “at one with,” the term was used to describe the reconciliation between God and humans. In the Old Testament, “to

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make an atonement” is the translation of the verb kpr, a term that is difficult to translate correctly. Noting the similarities between this verb and the Akkadian verb kuppuru, which means to cleanse by wiping off, many have suggested that the verb is expiatory in meaning.34 This does appear to be the case when the term is associated with the sin offering, which is offered when offense or uncleanness has been experienced. Yet “to make atonement” is also one of the purposes behind the burnt offering, which is not offered as a direct result of sin or wrongdoing. Thus, two types of atonement appear to be associated with the sacrificial rituals: (1) the atonement that is associated with the forgiveness of sins, reflected in the sin offering, and (2) the atonement enacted not for sin or wrongdoing at all, such as in the case of the burnt offering.

So what are we to make of these acts effecting atonement? First, the acts presuppose an already existing relationship between the Israelites and God. In other words, these acts do not highlight the entering into of a relationship with God; instead, their purpose was to reconcile or renew an already existing relationship. Second, as those that required an item coming into contact with the altar demonstrated, we see the primary purpose of atonement was to make one holy and, therefore, like God. Third, in all cases, the atoning acts were performed by mortals to bring themselves into a state where they could interact with God and receive his beneficence. This last point cannot be stressed enough. From the biblical texts, it appears that atonement required the actions of two parties, God and mortals, in which the latter was responsible to create a situation that allowed God to engage with them. Thus, in the liminal space of the tabernacle, acts of atonement made it possible for humans and God to interact directly, each one willing and desirous to engage with the other.

It is not hard to see the Christological symbolism inherent within each of these sacrificial acts, not the least of which is in the importance of the blood to enact atonement.35 In the Book of Mormon, Lehi explained

34. kipper, kappōreg, kōper, kippurīm, TDOT, 7:290.
35. Leviticus 17:10–14: “And whatsoever man there be of the house of Israel, or of the strangers that sojourn among you, that eateth any manner of blood; I will even set my face against that soul that eateth blood, and will cut him off from among his people. For the life of the flesh is in the blood: and I have given it
the relationship between the Christ’s atoning act and sacrifice, calling Christ’s act a “sacrifice for sin,” or, in other words, a sin offering (2 Nephi 2:7). Christ’s sacrifice is certainly reflected in the sin offering, the explicit purpose of which is to bring on forgiveness through the individual’s offering. Just as the blood of the sin offering covers certain items of the tabernacle, thereby reconciling to God the individual represented by the offering, Christ’s blood covers us, reconciling us to his Father. Similarly, the burnt offering represents all that he offered to bring about reconciliation, as well as what we are expected to offer for this reconciliation.  

36. The astute reader will have noted that this study has only addressed two of the three primary sacrificial forms. The third sacrificial form is the šēlāmîm, or peace offering, and may be distinguished from the others by the consumption of the animal by the offerer. Unlike the ‘olâh and hatt’āt/ʾāšām sacrifices, once the priest has offered the portion of the animal dedicated to God (namely, the blood and some of the internal viscera such as the fat), the offerer then takes the rest of the animal to consume at home. There is a time restriction to the consumption: the animal has to be consumed within one or two days, depending on whether it is a thanksgiving or vow offering (Leviticus 7:15–17). Nothing may be preserved or saved; thus the šēlāmîm offering was a shared experienced with friends, family, or neighbors, who often helped in the consumption of the sacrifice. Of the three sacrificial forms, the peace offering is perhaps the most intriguing because it is not intended to overcome a negative condition. Instead, it acts to enhance a positive event, whether that was the completion of a project (i.e., the construction of the temple) or the fulfilling of a vow. The communal nature of this sacrificial form, in light of its function, suggests that the peace offering was the highest offering that could be offered. “To make atonement” is not mentioned as a function of the third form of animal sacrifice, the “peace offering.” This may be because the peace offering is not offered to overcome a deficit or division between God and his people but instead to commemorate the fulfillment of a vow, or other blessed event, in which God’s hand is recognized.
But, perhaps most importantly, Christ and the agency he expressed in performing the atoning sacrifice is an example to us that we, too, can have a direct relationship with the Father. Just as he offered up a sacrifice of a broken heart and a contrite spirit, so he has encouraged us to do the same, showing that it is possible for us to achieve our ultimate goal of oneness with the Father. Through their ritual performance, the Israelites expressed their desire to be reconciled in their covenant relationship with God—a relationship that emphasized their divine nature and potential to become holy (just as God himself was), a relationship that is the very essence of worship.  

“FOR THE ANOINTING OF THE LORD IS UPON YOU”

As important as the atonement rites were to the Israelites’ worship, another category of rites may have been equally as important—those performed when making the relationships in the first place. Such was the purpose of the rite described in Exodus 24 and the anointing of the tabernacle and the priests as described in Exodus 40 and Leviticus 8, respectively. Like the rites of reconciliation, while each rite of induction or inclusion differed from one another at points, there does seem to have been a common element that defined these rites as part of their own classification, that

In other words, there is no need for atonement to be made because the peace offering recognizes that atonement, or reconciliation, is already present.

37. Biblical scholar Jonathan Klawans considers this in his article “Pure Violence: Sacrifice and Defilement in Ancient Israel,” Harvard Theological Review 94, no. 2 (2001): 135–57: “Jon D. Levenson . . . has argued that the biblical narrative of tabernacle (and temple) construction take on a cosmic significance. . . . In so doing, Levenson demonstrates that the priestly traditions understand tabernacle and temple construction as an act of imitatio Dei. If the building of the temple can be understood as an act of imitatio Dei, and if the process of preparation for the rituals that will take place there can be understood likewise, can this concept help us to better understand at least some aspects of ancient Israelite animal sacrifice?” (145).

38. As was the reintroduction of the leper described in Leviticus 14.
element being the placement of blood, water, or oil on the individual being introduced or reintroduced into the society.

The ritual sequence in Exodus 24 was used to note Israel’s acceptance of the law as described in Exodus 24:3, “And Moses came and told the people all the words of the Lord, and all the judgments: and all the people answered with one voice, and said, All the words which the Lord hath said will we do.” According to the text, Moses then copied the law down onto another medium, rose up the next morning, built an altar, and erected twelve pillars representing the twelve tribes of Israel. Since priests had not been ordained yet, Moses had young men of Israel offer both burnt and peace offerings, both of which included the splashing of blood against the sides of the altar.39

But in this account, only half of the blood was used against the sides of the altar, unlike the practice in later burnt and peace offerings. The other half was splashed on the people following the reading of the law and the people’s declaration that they would obey the precepts within: “And he [Moses] took the book of the covenant, and read in the audience of the people: and they said, All that the Lord hath said will we do, and be obedient. And Moses took the blood, and sprinkled it on the people, and said, Behold the blood of the covenant, which the Lord hath made with you concerning all these words” (Exodus 24:7–8). In this case, the blood became the tangible symbol of the covenant made between God and the Israelites, and the splashing of blood upon the altar perhaps suggested that the altar stood as a symbol for God.40 In other words, blood was splashed on the altar, which represented God, just as blood was splashed on the

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39. The use of the young men in the ritual process highlights that the Israelite priestly system had not been established yet, nor had the election of the Levites taken place. In light of this, it is possible that the young men were firstborn. Numbers 8 recounts the substitution of the Levites for the firstborn of the Israelites, suggesting that the firstborn generally could have had priestly or cultic functions, which were now subsumed into the Aaronic and Levitical families.

40. The concept of inanimate objects representing God is found elsewhere in the Old Testament. For instance, the ark of the covenant represented God when taken into battle against the Philistines. Likewise, both the Book of Mormon and New Testament Saints understood that the bronze serpent represented Christ.
people—both parties were bound by blood and partook of the covenant experience.41

In a similar manner were the tabernacle and Aaron and his sons to be initiated, using both the special anointing oil and the blood of a particular offering known as the consecration offering. Unlike other oil the anointing oil was a scented oil, made according to a specific formula, to be used solely to sanctify the items within the tabernacle: “And thou shalt anoint the tabernacle of the congregation therewith, and the ark of the testimony, and the table and all his vessels, and the candlestick and his vessels, and the altar of incense, and the altar of burnt offering with all his vessels, and the laver and his foot. And thou shalt sanctify them, that they may be most holy: whatsoever toucheth them shall be holy. And thou shalt anoint Aaron and his sons, and consecrate them, that they may minister unto me in the priest’s office” (Exodus 30:26–30).

Beginning in the Holy of Holies and moving outward until reaching the wash laver in the tabernacle courtyard, Moses anointed the tabernacle furniture. After that, Aaron and his sons were brought forward and washed. Moses then clothed Aaron and anointed him by pouring the oil over his head. The ram of consecration was then slaughtered, but instead of splashing all of the blood on the sides of the altar, some of it was daubed on the right earlobe, the right thumb, and the right big toe of Aaron and his sons. The final rite of the sanctification process was to take the blood on the altar, which had mingled with the anointing oil, and splash it onto Aaron, and his sons, rendering him “hallowed, and his garments, and his sons, and his sons’ garments” (Exodus 29:21). As with the splashing of the blood onto the whole of Israel in Exodus 24, the splashing of the blood

41. Tzvi Abusch, “Blood in Israel and Mesopotamia,” in Emanuel: Studies in Hebrew Bible, Septuagint and Dead Sea Scrolls in Honor of Emanuel Tov, ed. Shalom M. Paul et al. (Leiden: Brill, 2003), 675–84: “Blood sacrifice, in and [of] itself, actually stands in opposition to the natural relationship created at birth. It creates relations between [people], and places these artificial relationships on a higher level than the natural relationship of mother and child created in the blood of birth. . . . Blood served many purposes in the Israelite cult. Surely one of them was that of creating and maintaining bonds of kinship which were defined in terms of covenant” (678, 684).
and oil onto Aaron ritually established the relationship between Aaron and God. 42

Unlike the atonement rites, the induction rites used to establish the initial relationship with God were not repeated. In other words, whereas all the atoning rituals were repeated often, the act of being anointed or splashed with the blood or oil, once done, was never performed again. Moreover, in the case of the tabernacle’s dedication, the process of anointing began from the inside out, from the Holy of Holies to the laver outside. The direction from which the anointing began, with the oil specifically designated as God’s own, and the single performance of the act each suggest that the act was to be understood as if God himself were doing it. Just as individuals prepared themselves to enter into the presence of God, the anointing process seems to have suggested that God did not just wait, but he prepared the space and items so that such interaction was possible. In other words, just as mortals sanctified themselves and the space around them to reconcile themselves with God, so God participated in preparing the space and the individual so that reconciliation could happen.

Unlike the acts of the mortal, however, which had to be repeated often, God’s anointing act needed to be done only once to transform the individual or item into a state of holiness. This transformation by God

42. C. Houtman, “On the Function of the Holy Incense (Exodus XXX 34–38) and the Sacred Anointing Oil (Exodus XXX 22–33),” Vetus Testamentum 42, no. 4 (1992): 465: “Emphatically, [God] forbids [the oil’s use] as a cosmetic. Also sprinkling it on unqualified persons is not permitted by him (Ex. xxx 32–33). The fragrance, which is spread abroad by the anointing oil, is determined by its composition. By claiming the exclusive right to the composition of the sacred anointing oil, YHWH reserves its special fragrance for himself. By anointing[,] 'his' fragrance is transmitted to his dwelling and its inventory (Ex. xxx 26–29) and to the priests, devoted to his service (Ex. xxx 30). So YHWH’s fragrance becomes attached to his house and his attendants. So they are marked by his personality. Their exclusive belonging to YHWH is expressed for an organ of sense in a perceptible way. Because YHWH’s aroma envelopes them, by nose they can be known as YHWH’s representatives.” Interestingly, according to the great medieval rabbincic commentator Rashi, the command to wash Aaron and his sons with water (Exodus 29:4) actually meant immersion of the whole body. Abraham Cohen, ed., The Soncino Chumash (New York: The Soncino Press, 1997), 527n4.
THE PROMISE AND THE PROVOCATION

is expressed throughout Leviticus. Leviticus 21:10–12 reveals that the high priest is not allowed to act like the rest of society during the mourning process because “the crown of the anointing oil of his God is upon him.” The same concept can be found earlier in chapter 10, where, after the deaths of Nadab and Abihu, Aaron and the remaining sons are told to “not let the hair of your heads hang loose, and do not tear your clothes, lest you die, and wrath come upon all the congregation; . . . and do not go outside the entrance of the tent of meeting, lest you die, for the anointing oil of the Lord is upon you” (Leviticus 10:6–7 English Standard Version). As the two passages suggest, the oil belonged to God himself, transforming that which touched it and making those items representative of him or able to interact with him. Aaron, having been anointed, is not allowed to engage in normal, “profane” behavior. The anointing allows Aaron to interact with the divine—the anointing being a divine act and creating an environment that allows mortal acts to have efficacy.43

What is particularly pleasing about this rite of induction is that in many ways it is the complement to the atonement rites. Both sets of rituals present the performer, either divine or mortal, as one who wants to have a relationship with the other. In the case of the atonement rites, the rituals emphasize an individual’s right to have a relationship with God, even the inherent right to become like God, while the initiation rites demonstrate God’s continuing work in bringing that result about.

43. That Moses is performing the rite instead of God is not a hindrance, since Moses is more than a priest—he acts in the stead of God. For more on the association of Moses with God, see W. A. Meeks, “Moses as God and King,” in Religions in Antiquity: Essays in Memory of Erwin Ramsdell Goodenough, ed. J. Neusner, Numen Supplemental 14 (Leiden: Brill, 1968), 353–59; see also Crispin Fletcher-Louis, “4Q374: A Discourse on the Sinai Tradition: The Deification of Moses and Early Christology,” in Dead Sea Discoveries 3, no. 3 (Leiden: Brill, 1996): 236–52. This principle is of course found in Restoration scripture: “And I will lay my hand upon you by the hand of my servant Sidney Rigdon” (Doctrine and Covenants 36:2).
THE GOLDEN CALF

As Moses was receiving the instructions for the tabernacle and its dedication at the top of Sinai, the Israelites at the mountain’s base feared that Moses would not return. They requested of Aaron the crafting of “gods, which shall go before us” (Exodus 32:1). The result of this was a golden calf, which was to be “thy gods, O Israel, which brought thee up out of the land of Egypt” (verse 4), commemorated by a dedicatory feast “to the LORD” (literally, “to Yahweh”). Like the other scenes of the Sinai narrative, the golden calf narrative in its final form demonstrates inconsistencies that suggest multiple texts were used in its construction.44 Perhaps the biggest challenge is the presumed ignorance of the Israelites concerning God’s

44. See Cornelis Houtman, Exodus, vol. 3: Chapters 20–40 (Leuven, Belgium: Peeters, 2000), 617, 619. Nowhere is this more obvious than in the outcome of Aaron. The Hebrew text of Exodus 32:22–25 is clear that Aaron tried to excuse himself to Moses for making the golden calf by vilifying the people to Moses. But Aaron bore responsibility for letting the people get out of control: “And Aaron said, Let not the anger of my lord wax hot: thou knowest the people, that they are set on mischief. For they said unto me, Make us gods, which shall go before us: for as for this Moses, the man that brought us up out of the land of Egypt, we wot not what is become of him. And I said unto them, Whosoever hath any gold, let them break it off. So they gave it to me: then I cast it into the fire, and thre came out this calf. And when Moses saw that the people were naked; (for Aaron had made them naked unto their shame among their enemies:) Yet, when Moses called for the righteous Levites to slay the three thousand rebels (Exodus 32:26–28), Aaron was not destroyed. He lived to the ripe old age of 123 and died on Mount Hor (Numbers 20:22–29; 33:38–39). Apparently, Aaron’s repentance was real and accepted by the Lord. Some have suggested that the confusion concerning Aaron and his role reflects two versions of this narrative, a northern, Israelite narrative and a southern, Judahite narrative. See Frank Moore Cross, Canaanite Myth and Hebrew Epic: Essays in the History of the Religion of Israel (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1973, 195–216; see also Matthew Robert Rasure, “Priests Like Moses: Earliest Divisions in the Priesthood of Ancient Israel” (PhD diss., Harvard University, 2019). The relationship between Exodus 32 and Deuteronomy 9–10 has also been noted by many; for instance, see Christine E. Hayes, “Golden Calf Stories: The Relationship of Exodus 32 and Deuteronomy 9–10,” in Idea of Biblical Interpretation: Essays in Honor of James L. Kugel, ed. H. Najman (Leiden: Brill, 2003), 45–93, who assumes the Exodus tradition came before the Deuteronomic one; see also John Van Seters, “Law and the Wilderness Rebellion Tradition: Ex
hand in their deliverance. As many have noted, even as the narrative states that the calf was to represent the gods that led the children of Israel out of Egypt, Aaron declares that the day of the calf’s dedication would be a feast to Yahweh.\(^45\) Two questions thus arise. First, what exactly did the calf represent, and second, was there one idol or many?

The function of the idol seems relatively clear. As the text states, Moses’ absence has led the Israelites to fear that their connection with the divine has been broken in some fashion; thus, the idol was needed for access. As to what they wished to access, some have suggested, based on the image of a calf, that the deity expressed represented someone other than Yahweh. In most major cultures of the ancient Near East, the bull (and in some cases the cow as well) represented a major deity of that culture (which is why figurines of these animals have been found by archaeologists). “The depiction of a god in the form of a bull was widespread throughout the entire ancient Near East [and] . . . was a symbol of lordship, strength, vital energy, and fertility”—all sovereign attributes.\(^46\) In light of the Israelites’ history in Egypt, some have suggested that the golden calf represented the bull-god Apis: “Deification of a live, ‘sacred’ bull was initiated during the First Egyptian Dynasty and continued throughout ancient Egypt’s long history. Bull cults of the Nile delta, which existed at the same time and location as the Israelites’ sojourn in Egypt, were dedicated to Horus, the ‘god of heaven.’”\(^47\) But this would presuppose that the Israelites expected an Egyptian deity to deliver them from Egypt, which hardly seems correct. Others have suggested that the calf represented the Mesopotamian deity Sin, from

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45. It should be noted that some scholars believe this to be a later gloss in order to rehabilitate the image of Aaron, from whom will emerge the prominent priestly line during the Davidic monarchy and beyond. See Cross, Canaanite Myth and Hebrew Epic, 195–207; see also Lloyd R. Bailey, “The Golden Calf,” Hebrew Union College Annual 42 (1971): 99.


the Israelites’ historical attachment to Harran. Yet, outside of this one supposed instance, the deity Sin does not seem to play any particular role elsewhere in Israelite religious practice. Furthermore, closer culturally and linguistically, both the Ugaritic deities El and Baal were depicted in bovine imagery. Having said all this, it is more likely that the idol was meant to represent Yahweh, who could be found to be represented by the bull as well.

Though not common at all in the Old Testament, there are a few references that associate Yahweh with a bull—more specifically, the power and vitality of the bull. A portion of Israel’s blessing to his son Joseph is translated in the King James Version as “the arms of his hands were made strong by the hands of the mighty God of Jacob” (Genesis 49:24; italics in original). However, the word God appears in italics, meaning that the literal word in the Hebrew text was not God. Rather, it is avir—which means “bull” or “bull-like.” That is also the case in Psalm 132:2, “God” is translated from ‘avir. Though it is unclear what exactly the symbolism from the


50. Michael B. Hundley, “What Is the Golden Calf?,” Catholic Biblical Quarterly 79 (2017): 568: “To this point in Exodus, Yhwh has demonstrated his power by leading the people out of Egypt, and Yhwh/Elohim has been the only god directly referenced. Indeed, nothing in the text to this point indicates that any deity other than Yhwh is in view.”

51. John N. Oswalt, “Golden Calves and the ‘Bull of Jacob’: The Impact on Israel of Its Religious Environment,” in Israel’s Apostasy and Restoration: Essays in Honor of Roland K. Harrison, ed. Avraham Gileadi (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1988), 12: “abbir refers to the characteristics of the bull, in particular, its might. Thus, especially in Hebrew poetry, it may be used of the bull itself (Ps 50:13). More frequently, however, it refers to ‘mighty (bullish) ones,’ either divine (Ps 68:30) or human (Isa 34:7). The term abir, if indeed it is a cognate of abbir, is removed from bull one step further and concentrates solely on the
Old Testament is, the bronze sea constructed for Solomon’s Temple rested on twelve oxen. Archaeologists have found representations of small male calves, cast in metal, among the material remains of cultures surrounding the Israelites, while an ostracon from Samaria was found with the name ‘glyw (“Yahweh-Calf,” “Yahweh is the Calf,” or “Calf of Yahweh”).

It has also been argued that figurines or images of animals such as the bull were used as pedestals of a god. Thus, the golden calf would have served as the pedestal for Jehovah—a symbol of his presence. In support of this notion, scholars point to parallels in other cultures. For example, a stela from the eighth century BC shows the storm god Adad (also known as Hadad and Baal) standing on the back of a bull, with lightning bolts in each hand. In such a scenario, Aaron may have had it in his mind that he was making a graphic visual aid to help the people refocus on Jehovah. Thus, it is likely that the Israelites substituted the intercessory role of Moses with an idol that would function the same way.

As to whether there was one or more idols, though calf is singular, the narrative is consistent in the use of the plural, particularly the verbal forms, when referring to the idol. In light of the plural, some have suggested that the calf narrative reflects the cultic innovations made by Jeroboam.

attribute of might. . . . Its biblical usage makes it plain that the phrase no longer has any reference to the concrete bull but has become solely descriptive.”


54. See the photograph in Coogan, Old Testament, 132.

55. It is possible that this explains why the idol was to be made out of the earrings. This jewelry was associated with the organs of hearing and thus the reception of God’s will since the Israelites had refused to see or talk with Yahweh directly.

56. The relationship between 1 Kings 12 and Exodus 32 has been the subject of much discussion. Some believe that the Exodus 32 narrative was written based on Jeroboam’s innovations. See John Van Seters, “Law and the Wilderness Rebellion Tradition: Exodus 32,” in Society of Biblical Literature Seminar Papers
According to 1 Kings 12, to forestall the travel of Israelites to Jerusalem to worship at the temple (and therefore potentially placing themselves under Solomonic hegemony), Jeroboam installed two calves, one at Bethel and one at Dan, declaring at their installation: “It is too much for you to go up to Jerusalem: behold thy gods, O Israel, which brought thee up out of the land of Egypt” (12:28). Unfortunately, if the Exodus narrative is influenced by the 1 Kings narrative, then the argument is circular, for it is clear that the Jeroboam narrative is dependent on the Sinai scene. Interestingly, a reference in Nehemiah suggests that the original Exodus narrative may have had the singular: “Yea, when they had made them a [golden] molten


57. While some have suggested that the golden calf narrative is dependent upon 1 Kings 12 (see previous note), the consensus is that the Exodus account reflects at the very least an early tradition. This appears to be the sense in the 1 Kings 12 narrative, as Jeroboam suggests his innovations are really a reform, returning the Israelites to an older worship tradition, rather than a divergence from established orthopraxy. For instance, see Nicholas Wyatt, “Of Calves and Kings: The Canaanite Dimension in the Religion of Israel,” Scandinavian Journal of the Old Testament 6, no. 1 (1992): 68–91, who believes that it is a return to El worship. What has gone unnoticed is that the 1 Kings narrative hearkens back not only to Exodus 32 but also to Exodus 19. Among the reforms, was the institution of a priesthood that was to be made up of “the lowest of the people, which were not of the sons of Levi” (1 Kings 12:31). This new priesthood, not dependent upon lineage, would accord with the original promise God made in Exodus 19—namely, that all of Israel could be a “royal priesthood/kingdom of priests/kings and priests.”
calf, and said, This is thy God that brought thee up out of Egypt” (Nehemiah 9:18).

Yet even if the golden calf was made to represent Yahweh, the reader is to understand the image fell under the parameter of an idol, and thus the Israelites had quickly broken the explicit commandments concerning the worshipping of idols and other gods.58 As the Israelites’ perfidy unfolded and Jehovah reported their treachery to Moses, Jehovah created a circumstance that tested and then demonstrated the prophet’s exceptional integrity and character. The Lord proposed to Moses that the Israelites should be destroyed and that he (Moses) should be raised up as the father of a great replacement nation. Instead of seizing the opportunity to exalt himself, his name, and his posterity, Moses interceded on behalf of Jacob’s posterity, pled for their continued existence, and reasoned with the Lord for another chance for them to repent. The superior reading of the Joseph Smith Translation demonstrates Moses’ intercessory compassion: “And Moses besought the Lord his God, and said, Lord, why doth thy wrath wax hot against thy people, which thou hast brought forth out of the land of Egypt with great power, and with a mighty hand? Wherefore should the Egyptians speak, and say, For mischief did he bring them out, to slay them in the mountains, and to consume them from the face of the earth? Turn from thy fierce wrath. Thy people will repent of this evil; therefore come thou not out against them” (JST Exodus 32:11–12, emphasis added).59

58. Hundley, “What Is the Golden Calf?,” 578: “Worshiping the deity in an unapproved way—in this case through a calf image—even in a dire situation is unacceptable and subject to extreme censure. It lies in the category of heterodox worship, which leads to the worship of other gods and the rejection of YHWH. The use of the grammatically plural: elohim in a singular context is the storyteller’s way of making his displeasure clear.”

59. This specific episode immediately causes one to reflect on the scene depicted in modern revelation wherein Jesus Christ, the Great Intercessor, continually stands before God the Father and pleads the cause of the entire human family (see Doctrine and Covenants 45:3–5). Thus, the meekness and intercessory roles of both Moses and Jesus Christ are highlighted in scripture across the ages. Ironically, as Moses returned from the mountain to the camp of Israel to witness firsthand the Israelites’ apostasy, his own “anger waxed hot, and he cast the tables out of his hands, and brake them beneath the mount” (Exodus 32:19).
The making of the golden calf appears to have been a manifestation of the fear and unabating spiritual immaturity that the Israelites exhibited when Jehovah first manifested his glory and power to them. The practical effect of the golden calf was for the Israelites to signal that they had finally rejected Jehovah’s offer to make of them a holy nation and a kingdom of priests. At first, the Israelites had committed to do all that Jehovah desired, to comply with all he was attempting to accomplish. But they rejected the proffered blessings. Now, many weeks later, they were not just rejecting the Lord’s proposal, they were committing an act of open rebellion. Sadly, they forfeited the glory and power and blessings of the true and living God in exchange for a worthless, lifeless figurine. As the psalmist recorded, “They made a calf in Horeb, and worshipped the molten image. Thus they changed their glory into the similitude of an ox that eateth grass. They forgat God their saviour, which had done great things in Egypt” (Psalm 106:19–21).

Thereby hangs the tale. The Israelites gave up the promise of sanctification and exaltation for a lesser order of things. The nullification of Jehovah’s highest promises to the children of Israel was graphically and symbolically communicated by Moses in his breaking the tablets when he came down from Mount Sinai. In the ancient Near East, to “break a tablet” could signify the invalidating of a treaty. In the Akkadian legal terminology of Hammurabi’s era, for example, the phrase *tuppam hepu* (“break the tablet”) meant to break an agreement, to invalidate or repudiate a document.60 Thus, the terms of Jehovah’s original agreement with the Israelites (Exodus 19:5–8) were no longer in force. Broken tablets reflected the rejected promise.

The result of this provocation was the giving of a new set of tablets, which included a set of commandments that emphasized and built upon the earlier injunctions against worshipping other gods and engaging in idol worship.61 Joseph Smith revealed that the new instructions also reflected

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61. This second set of instructions is often referred to as the “ritual decalogue” because of its focus on worship performances. Some have suggested that it is a “J” version of the covenant law. For more, see Coogan, *Old Testament*, 115.
the loss of the Melchizedek Priesthood and the saving ordinances associated with the higher priesthood, as noted in his translation:

And the Lord said unto Moses, Hew thee two other tables of stone, like unto the first, and I will write upon them also, the words of the law, according as they were written at the first on the tables which thou brakest; but it shall not be according to the first, for I will take away the priesthood out of their midst; therefore my holy order, and the ordinances thereof, shall not go before them; for my presence shall not go up in their midst, lest I destroy them.

But I will give unto them the law as at the first, but it shall be after the law of a carnal commandment; for I have sworn in my wrath, that they shall not enter into my presence, into my rest, in the days of their pilgrimage. Therefore do as I have commanded thee, and be ready in the morning, and come up in the morning unto mount Sinai, and present thyself there to me, in the top of the mount. (JST Exodus 34:1–2)

As the additional revelation make clear, the first set of instructions, at least in terms of worship, included ordinances associated with the Melchizedek Priesthood. The Israelites, having rejected the first promise to enter into the Lord’s presence at Sinai, had now, through the golden calf, rejected the Melchizedek Priesthood. Only a select few, including the prophets, held the higher priesthood, the holy order of the Son of God. In fact, in practical terms, only one-twelfth of the tribes of Israel held any priesthood at all—the Levites. This meant that the opportunity for the community of Israel to see God was curtailed. Instead of a kingdom of priests of the Most High, the Israelites (the Levites) became a kingdom of Aaronic priests.

Instead of a holy nation, where all individuals could represent themselves directly to God, the priests began to act as intermediaries and represented the people before God. The Mosaic law replaced the higher law. Instead of the opportunity and privilege of becoming sanctified through individually administered temple ordinances, the Israelites as a whole came to live under the corporate structures administered by the lesser priesthood. Brigham Young stated, “If they [the Israelites] had been sanctified and holy, the children of Israel would not have travelled one year
with Moses before they would have received their endowments and the Melchisedec Priesthood.” 62

The children of Israel lost much that would not be restored until the Messiah came in the meridian of time. Yet, even at this lowest point, God did not abandon them. Even as the instructions restricted the blessings that the Israelites could experience on a large scale, the instructions still formally established a covenant relationship in which God promised to “do marvels, such as have not been done in all the earth, nor in any nation” (Exodus 34:10), before the people of Israel, which in turn, would be the means by which others would see the wonderful things of God. The tabernacle itself was to still act as a meeting place.

Intriguingly, one set of instructions stayed the same between the original and the secondary tablets—namely, that all Israelites were to come to the tabernacle three times a year. The King James Version of Exodus 23:17 reads, “Three times in the year all thy males shall appear [Hebrew, yērāʾeh] before the Lord God.” It has been argued that before the Masoretes vocalized the consonants of the text of Exodus 23:17, specifically the Hebrew verb yod-resh-he, yērāʾeh was originally intended to be read as yirʾeh—the Qal active form rather than the now extant Niphal passive form, thus providing a reading of “three times in the year all thy males shall see the Lord God” rather than “three times in the year all thy males shall be seen/present themselves (“appear before”) before the Lord God.” 63 The Samaritan Bible supports this emended reading and better harmonizes with Jehovah’s intended purpose for the Israelites. If this emended reading is correct, the commandment to go to the tabernacle three times per year, reflected in both sets of tablets, potentially carried with it the great promise to see the face of God.

Whether such a reading is correct, the new law still emphasized the election of the children of Israel and the important role they played in the salvation history for all humankind. Ideally, the Israelites would act, as Paul described it, as a “schoolmaster,” preparing those who practiced it


sincerely a means by which they would remember God and their duty to him (Galatians 3:24). Again, Restoration scripture gives us a better appreciation of this law, Nephi in particular noting that the law functioned to direct one to “look forward with steadfastness unto Christ” (2 Nephi 25:24). Perhaps even more intriguing is Nephi’s declaration that one of the purposes of the law was to teach one “that life . . . is in Christ, and know for what end the law was given” (25:27). Nephi’s words imply that even as the law itself did not allow for salvation, it was meant to teach one a life in Christ and the original promise given to the Israelites. Thus, the narrative concludes on a hopeful note. Even as the children of Israel failed to enter into God’s rest at Sinai, Christ gave the instructions necessary and appropriate for their spiritual state in order to better themselves, increase their faith, and ultimately avail themselves of the promise offered in the first place.