After three months of traveling, the Hebrews reached Mount Sinai. Moses constantly goes up and down the mountain (Exodus 19:3, 7, 9, 14, 20, 25).

If the Israelites arrive at Sinai in Exodus 19:1, they will not depart from there until Numbers 10:11-2. Their encampment at Sinai was approximately eleven months.

**The Covenant at Sinai (19)**

The first time that Moses ascends Sinai, God speaks and Moses listens (vv. 3-6). It is, first of all, a reminder to Israel of God's faithfulness and concern. Israel has not come this far either by coincidence or aggressiveness (v. 4). But from the “what I did… I bore… and brought you” of v. 4, we pass to the “now… if you will obey” of v. 5. We pass from cause to effects, from divine love to human responsibility, and then from effects to results: “you shall be” (v. 5).

1. Cause: “what I did to Egyptians, … I bore you on eagle's wings and brought you to myself”
2. Effect: “If you will obey my voice and keep my covenant”
3. Results: “you shall be my treasured possession”; “you shall be to me a kingdom of priests”; “you shall be… a holy nation.” Thus, God's people are unique, separated from the world, but only that they may serve as ministers of reconciliation in that world.

Of these first three expressions, we may call a word about privilege; the second, a word about responsibility; the third, a word about character.

Perhaps all too quickly the people respond positively and enthusiastically (v. 8), without taking the time to think about the implications of their response.

The second time (vv. 10-13) there is again, only monologue. To give verbal assent to obedience is one thing; to consecrate and purify oneself is another. Israel's response to God's first word at Sinai was words. Israel's response to God's second word was action: putting on clean clothes and avoiding physical contact with the mountain upon pain and death. Third, the people temporarily abstain from normal sexual activities.

The people spend the better part of three days (v. 16) preparing to meet God. Nothing is casual or cavalier. Rather, it is something for which one prepares diligently and thoroughly. And most importantly, the worshipers must be sanctified or purified (v. 14)

The third time is prefaced by the descent of Yahweh to the peak of Mount Sinai (v. 18). Far from being his domicile, the mountain functions only as Yahweh's temporary abode. His revelation to his people is accompanied by thunder, lightning, a thick cloud, dense smoke, fire, a shaking of the mountain, and trumpet blasts. All of this is hardly intended to encourage the Israelites to press for too much familiarity. It is their Lord whom they are about to encounter. And for all the electrifying atmosphere present throughout this chapter—thunder, cloud, lightning, threat of death, and so on—the Israelites are not tempted to run and get as far away as possible, to put as much distance between themselves and Sinai as they can. The presence of God attracts, it does not repel. Thus, the people are told not to go too near to Sinai (19:12-13).

For the third time Moses ascends to the top of the mountain (v. 20). On this occasion the Lord adds a further restriction. Not even the priests are to approach God (v. 24). Only Aaron may accompany Moses. In anticipation of the tabernacle, the tip of Sinai has become a Holy of Holies; God's holy presence is there. It is forbidden to everyone except Moses and Aaron, who will eventually be high priest.
Hebrews 12:18-29 is an interesting commentary on Exodus 19. It begins (vv. 18-24) by contrasting approaching God under the old covenant at Mount Zion. Pyrotechnics give way to Jesus as an indication of God’s presence. And yet such a change means not lesser accountability but greater accountability (vv. 25-29), for God not only was (at Sinai) but still is “a consuming fire.” So, while the medium of God’s self-revelation has changed, God himself has not changed.

**The Decalogue (20:1-21)**

In all the dealings between the Israelites and the Egyptians, while the former was in servitude to the latter, Moses’ role was primarily that of mediator. God did not speak to Pharaoh, but he did send Moses to speak to Pharaoh. Once again, at Sinai his function still was to transmit God’s word to the people.

When God speaks to the Israelites, he addresses them as individuals not as a group. All the occurrences of “you” in the commandments are masculine singular, not plural.

**Characteristics of the Decalogue**

Eight of the Ten Commandments are negative prohibitions. Only two are positive: “Remember the sabbath day” … “Honor your father and mother”. This tells us that the Law is primarily restrictive. It functions as a deterrent. Thus, behavior in the community is regularized by the outlawing of certain types of activities.

The Ten Commandments is couched in the strongest form of negation that the Hebrew language has available. The commandments are not open to review and/or revision by any advisory panel that may freely abandon them if convenience warrants. They have linguistically, a built-in-permanence.

**Purpose of the Decalogue**

Chapter 19 of Exodus is concerned with the institution of the covenant. Then in chapter 20 and following are the laws. The purpose of the Decalogue is explicitly spelled out in 20:20; “Do not fear, for God has come to prove you, and that the fear of him may be before your eyes, that you may not sin.”

The verse appears almost to contain a contradiction (Ex. 20:20). One type of fear is condemned; another type of fear is indispensable. Which goes and which remains? That foe which there is no permanent place is fear in the sense of terror and trembling. No relationship will be healthy if it is based only on fright. The glory of the Lord that appeared to the shepherds at the birth of Jesus produced dread in them – “they were filled with fear” – and to calm them, the angel had to say, “Be not afraid” (Lk. 2:9-10). The angels “Be not afraid” is the same as Moses “Do not fear.”

What then is fear that is encouraged? It is fear in the sense of obedience to God’s revealed law. God’s purpose for his people in the giving of the Decalogue is “that you may not sin.” The language brings to mind 1 John 2:1; “I am writing this to you so that you may not sin.” That is the divine standard. But John’s fresh word is about divine sympathy: “But if anyone does sin, we have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous.” The connections of Exodus 20:20 with Abraham in Genesis 22 are especially important. These are the only two passages in the OT in which we read of a divine testing (using the Hebrew verb nasa) whose purpose is to produce “fear of God” in the one being tested.

**Structure of the Decalogue**

It is quite obvious that the intent of the first four commandments is different from that of the last six. The first four are vertical in their orientation and have to do with one’s relationship to God. The last are horizontal and deal with one’s relationships with fellow human beings. Perhaps it is significant that the commandment about parents is the first in those of horizontal dimension. There is a shift from creator to procreator, one’s life is owed to both.

When asked about the greatest commandment, Jesus, quoted Deuteronomy 6:5; “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind” (Matt. 22:37). That reduces into one sentence for the first four commandments. Jesus goes on to say, “And a second is like it, “You shall love your neighbor as yourself” (Matt. 22:39). That reduces into one sentence the last six commandments.