

c. The Ratification of the Covenant (24:1-8)

After receiving the terms of the covenant, Moses descended Mount Sinai with Yahweh's instruction to return to Him, this time with Aaron and his sons and seventy of Israel's elders. Implied in this directive was that Moses would first relay the words of covenant to Israel and they, in turn, would bind themselves to them. Then, being joined to God in covenant union, they could come before Him as sons. Thus, before returning with the others as directed, Moses recounted to all the people the Lord's words and ordinances and, as they had done previously, they solemnly swore to uphold all that Yahweh had spoken (vv. 1-3).

Consistent with God's previous covenants, this one was to be formally ratified in a sacred ritual, and toward that end Moses meticulously recorded all the words of the covenant in a book. When he was finished he constructed an altar at the foot of Sinai, setting it upon twelve pillars symbolizing the twelve tribes of Israel. He then sent young men to prepare sacrificial animals for offering upon it. What is crucial to observe is that, along with burnt offerings, they sacrificed *peace* offerings (24:5). Those offerings bore witness to the fact that Israel, the new son of the covenant, was at that time in perfect compliance with it. Yahweh had specified Israel's identity as His son and the responsibility it entailed, and the nation had expressly stated its commitment to fully live out its covenant identity. Father and son were at peace with one another.

As part of the ritual of ratification, Moses took the blood of the sacrifices and sprinkled half of it on the altar. Then he called together the sons of Israel and once again recounted to them the terms of the covenant, this time by reading from the book he had just completed. And just as they had done twice before, the people reiterated their commitment to exact obedience (vv. 6-7). With that commitment in place, Moses bound Israel to the covenant and their own oath by sprinkling them and the book of the covenant with blood – the blood of the covenant.

d. Celebration of the Covenant (24:9-11)

The ratification of the covenant heralded its inauguration; the son's intimacy with his Father was now formally established and, as yet, free of all corruption and compromise. Israel had offered peace offerings in testimony of this truth, and was now in a position to honor God's command to Moses. *Israel, the blameless son, was able to enter into its Father's presence in His holy sanctuary and there enjoy blessed communion with Him in a fellowship meal* (v. 11). Not only Moses, the appointed mediator, but the entire nation – represented in its future priests and elders – could righteously come before the Holy One of Israel.

The **covenantal context** for this encounter is crucial to its interpretation and therefore cannot be overemphasized. In the absence of this context, not only does the reader run the risk of missing the overall significance of the passage, various aspects of the account become biblically and theologically problematic.

- 1) In this regard, the most obvious problem that emerges pertains to the distinction afforded this particular group of Israelites. The narrative is explicit that they entered into God's presence and looked upon Him, and yet He didn't "stretch out His hand" against them. And yet, only a short while earlier God had warned that any person who even touched the border of His sanctuary-mountain would be killed. Moses had been told to establish bounds for the sons of Israel and solemnly warn them lest anyone "break through" to gaze upon the Lord (ref. 19:9-12, 20-21), and now, here were seventy-three men of Israel, standing on the holy mount, gazing at Yahweh and eating and drinking in His presence.
- 2) The difficulty is compounded by the fact that they were there at the Lord's command. The God who had directed these men to appear before Him was the same God who had sternly warned all the people to stay back from Him. The One who had threatened that He would "break out against" any man who gazed upon Him was now withholding His hand of judgment from numerous individuals who were doing just that.

Taken at face value, this startling turn of events seems to indicate either God's personal capriciousness or the arbitrariness of His command. Either way, the implication is the same: God is shown to lack integrity and therefore be unworthy of trust or submission. Without some further explanation, the whole of biblical revelation ends up being brought into disrepute.

The answer to these and other apparent difficulties arising from this encounter is its covenantal framework. *These men, drawn from the ranks of Israel, appeared before God as representing the covenant nation as it stood in perfect righteousness under the inaugurated covenant.* Fundamental to making sense of this context is the recognition that Israel is here being viewed as a **covenant entity** rather than a collection of individual people.

- These men were allowed to see God and, as it were, commune with Him, not because of their personal righteousness, but because of the covenantal righteousness of the nation they represented. The seventy elders, along with the individuals who would soon represent Israel as its priests, were designated by God to represent the whole nation. And the nation, as the covenant "son of God," was presently blameless before Him, *though every single individual within Israel – including Moses himself – existed in a state of personal sinfulness.* At issue in this context is not the status or condition of any one person or group of individuals, but the status of the nation under the terms of the covenant.
- This also explains God's apparent duplicity. By divine designation, these seventy-three men represented Yahweh's newly "begotten" son, and, in accordance with that relationship and the intimacy it implied, the Father was properly calling His son to come and commune with Him.

The communion of Father and son recounted in these verses – so mysterious and perplexing to many – spotlights what the covenant had made Israel to be and epitomized what it demanded of them. Obedience to the covenant amounted to living in authentic intimacy with Yahweh as His devoted son. What, then, could better communicate the meaning of the covenant and Israel’s conformity to it than an intimate meal of fellowship between Father and beloved child?

As this meal brought the covenant-making process to its climax, so it served as the high point of Israel’s historical life with God; never again would the covenant “son” enjoy such immediacy and intimacy with its Father. In fact, no sooner would the representatives of Israel depart from Yahweh’s presence than the nation would begin its departure from the covenant it had so eagerly embraced. But all this was according to a larger divine plan: The Sinai Covenant – as indeed Israel itself as the “son of the covenant” – was to play a crucial revelatory and preparatory role in the outworking of God’s purpose for mankind in Christ.

The Law of Moses was Israel’s *covenant* with God. As such, it established the Father-son relationship between its two parties. Yahweh had redeemed Israel and brought them to Himself at Sinai in order to unite with them in covenant intimacy. The purpose for the covenant was *communion*, and Yahweh attested to His accomplishment of that goal by communing with His “son” in a fellowship meal.

God’s goal in His covenant with Israel was restored communion – that is, the **recovery of sacred space**. But this relationship with Abraham’s physical seed was prevenient and prophetic: God intended it to portray and prepare for its ultimate and everlasting counterpart. And as Israel’s covenant relationship with God served a prophetic role, so did its pinnacle expression in the covenant meal on His sanctuary mountain. *What Israel had experienced with Yahweh on Mount Sinai was merely a splendid shadow – a glorious foretaste of an infinitely more glorious communion to come.* For that future communion would embrace the whole of humanity: Israel, the “image-son” and descendent of Abraham, was to find its own ultimacy in a new mankind springing from a new Man – a new Israel who is God’s true Image-Son. In Him the Lord has purposed to gather to Himself all of Abraham’s spiritual offspring and bring them to His holy sanctuary in order that they should commune with Him in perfect intimacy forever.

“Now it will come about that in the last days, the mountain of the house of the Lord will be established as the chief of the mountains, and will be raised above the hills; and all the nations will stream to it. And many peoples will come and say, ‘Come, let us go up to the mountain of the Lord, to the house of the God of Jacob; that He may teach us concerning His ways, and that we may walk in His paths.’ For the Torah will go forth from Zion, and the word of the Lord from Jerusalem. And He will judge between the nations, and will render decisions for many peoples; and they will hammer their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruning hooks. Nation will not lift up sword against nation, and never again will they learn war. Come, house of Jacob, and let us walk in the light of the Lord.” (Isaiah 2:2-5)