

A SHORT CHRONOLOGY OF EVENTS IN THE WILDERNESS

by Rev. Dr. R. Dean Anderson (Last Revised: 8 December, 2018)

The dates in the following chronology are given as day / month / year beginning with the Exodus on the 14th of the month Abib (later known as ‘Nisan’). It is often not appreciated that Israel spent almost a whole year at Mt. Sinai. We also tend to forget that we know virtually nothing of what happened during the 38 years of wandering in the desert. The only major event that we are told about is the rebellion of Korah and his supporters.

14-01-01 – departure from Egypt (at night)

- Red sea
- Marah (bitter water made sweet)
- Elim (oasis)

15-02-01 – arrival in the wilderness of Sin (between Elim and Sinai)

- manna (but not on 7th day) and quails
- Rephidim (renamed Massah and Meribah)
- fight against Amalek (Moses with raised hands)¹
- Jethro comes, appointment of judges

01-03-01 – arrival in Sinai

The camp is set up at the foot of the mountain and Moses receives a message from God which he relates to the elders. The people affirm the message and God tells them through Moses to prepare for His descent onto the mountain. Three days of preparation follow.

03-03-01 – 10 commandments spoken aloud by the Lord

On the 3rd day amidst thunder, lightening, trumpet blast etc., God speaks to the assembled people and tells them verbally the 10 commandments (Ex 19:3 to 20:18). After this the heads of the tribes and elders ask Moses to intercede for the rest of the Law lest they die in the presence of God (Ex 20:19-20; Deut 5:23-31). Hebr. 12:19 (cf. v.25) regards this as a rejection of God’s Word.

Moses climbs the mountain and receives many laws. He returns to the people and tells them these laws which he then writes down (the Book of the Covenant, cf. Ex 24:4,7 comprising Ex 20:22—23:33).² The length of time Moses is on the mountain is not mentioned. Given that the people later panic when he remains on the mountain for 40 days and nights, the period here must have been significantly shorter.

Next morning he builds an altar with 12 pillars. The blood of the covenant is sprinkled on the altar and the people! Moses, Aaron, Nadab, Abihu and 70 elders go up the mountain, eat a sacrificial meal and see God! (Ex 24:4-11)

Later Moses goes back up the mountain for 40 days and nights, taking Joshua, his servant, with him. This time he receives detailed ceremonial laws and the 10 commandments on the two stone tablets (Ex 24:12 to 31:18).³

Meanwhile Aaron makes the golden calf for the people (Ex 32:1-6).

Back on the mountain God informs Moses about the calf and says He will destroy the people. Moses prays that God will not do this and so God relents. At this point Moses goes down the mountain, sees the people dancing around the calf, and smashes the tablets (Ex 32:7-19). Recriminations follow and

1 It was Saul’s failure to properly enact the revenge against Amalek which spelled the end of his kingship (and life), cf. 1 Sam. 15 and 28 (Saul dies at the hand of an Amalekite).

2 See my commentary (also on this website), *The Laws of the Book of the Covenant: Introduction and commentary on Exodus 20:22 to 23:19*.

3 The various laws in these chapters, however, reflect the situation *after* the sin of the golden calf, e.g. the ordination of Aaron’s sons as priests instead of the first-born Israelites, the ransom payment of the temple tax, etc.

about 3,000 people die (Ex 32:20-29).

The next day Moses goes up to God (probably not to the mountain top though) to pray for the people's forgiveness. He returns and the people go into mourning. Yahweh tells Moses and the people to depart implying that He no longer wishes to dwell among them (the construction of the tabernacle is by implication cancelled). Moses then sets up a tent outside the camp where God may be approached. He then pleads with God that He nevertheless go with His people. This plea is answered favourably by God. (Ex 32:30 to 33:23). Moses is permitted to see the back of God.

Next morning Moses returns to the mountain top for the third time and receives more ceremonial law and a new copy of the two tablets. This is the second period of 40 days and nights that he spends there (Ex 34:1-28).

After this Moses returns, tells the people the Law and organises the construction of the sanctuary (Ex 34:29ff). It must be at this time that the mustering for the temple tax takes place (Ex. 30:11-16), the money of which is used for the construction of the tabernacle (Ex. 38:25-28).

01-01-02 – setting up of the tabernacle

- 8 days for the sanctification of 4 priests – Aaron's sons (Lev. 8-9, cf. Ex. 28-29)
- 12 days for the sacrifices of tribal chiefs (Num. 7) (continues during Passover celebration)
- cleansing of Levites (1 day, Num. 8)
- sin of Nabab and Abihu (Lev. 10) (must have occurred after the 8 day sanctification)

14-01-02 – Passover (without the week of unleavened bread)

01-02-02 – census (at which time Levites are substituted for first-born sons of Israelites)

14-02-02 – second Passover for the unclean due to contact with the dead (Nadab en Abihu?)

20-02-02 – departure from Sinai

after Sinai

-- -01-40 – encampment at Kadesh, death of Miriam (Num. 20:1)

01-05-40 – death of Aaron at Mt. Hor, 30 days mourning (Num. 33:38)

10-01-41 – crossing of Jordan (Josh. 4:19)

14-01-41 – celebration of Passover (circumcision a few days before)