

## INTERPRETING THE BIBLE

(\* especially relevant to Chapter 9)

### Worksheet on the giving of the Jewish Law - Exodus 31:18

(cf. Chapter 9, p.151)

**When He had finished speaking with Moses on Mount Sinai, the Lord gave him the two tablets of the Testimony, stone tablets written with the finger of God. (Exodus 31: 18)**

This passage refers to the account of Moses going alone up the mountain to think and pray and receive God's commandments which were written on the writing materials available there – on pieces of stone. These tablets were evidence of what had been given to Moses; most translations in English describe them as 'testimony'.

1. Write out the verse, and underline the words or phrases (at least three) which are anthropomorphic (which means speaking of God 'as though he is a human-being' from two Greek words 'anthropos' = man and 'morphe' = form, shape).
2. Recently, people have talked of computers in an anthropomorphic way. 'You must learn how to talk to a computer, and the next generation of computers will be able to talk back.' Do you think this is a good thing? Are there some dangers in speaking about a machine as though it were a human-being?
3. Whether or not you believe in God, do you think it is helpful to speak about God in an anthropomorphic way. Are there some dangers?
4. All Jewish scholars, whether they are Orthodox, Conservative or Reform, believe that God is spirit. God is not a human being, and language which suggests this is metaphorical. What does 'metaphor' mean? Why is it important to understand that this biblical passage is using metaphorical as well as literal language?
5. This is a comment by a Jewish rabbi. Do you agree with him? In the light of it, do you want to add to, or alter, your answers to questions 3 and 4?

Many modern people have trouble with the idea that God speaks. On a simple level it implies that God has lungs, a voice box, and a mouth, which doesn't make much sense. It hardly seems what the Bible meant. Even trying to think of 'the voice of God', without a body behind it, is difficult. Americans like to think of God's 'voice' as a rich baritone, suggesting that women aren't created as much in God's image as men are. Does God's 'voice' speak Hebrew as some people think? It all sounds too little for the Great God of the whole universe.
6. Although Orthodox, Conservative and Reform Jewswould agree that expressions such as 'God spoke' and 'God gave' are metaphors, there is an important difference in how they interpret the metaphors, in what is being described in this way. To the question 'Did God give the Law to Moses?' they would give different answers.

Study these answers and say in your own words where they disagree.

An *Orthodox* Jew might say, 'God gave the Law in that Moses wrote down exactly what God told him to write, Moses was only a scribe, a vehicle of communication.'

A *Conservative* Jew might say 'God gave the Law in that God was like a teacher giving a lesson to Moses which Moses had to try to understand and then communicate to others'

A *Reform* Jew might say 'God gave the Law in the sense that Moses wrote it but God inspired him.'