



NATIONAL GARDEN OF THE FOUNDERS



STATION 3

THE SINAI COVENANT

*God Gives His Law to Israel
From Bondage to Belonging*

*"I am the LORD thy God, which have
brought thee out of the land of Egypt."*

EXODUS 20:2

FAITH

MORALITY

LAW

EDUCATION

LIBERTY

FAITH / MORALITY / LAW / EDUCATION / LIBERTY

STATION OVERVIEW

From Bondage to Belonging

God gives His law to Israel.



FAITH



MORALITY



LAW



EDUCATION



LIBERTY

FOUNDATION

In the third month after leaving Egypt, Israel camped before Mount Sinai. Before God gave a single command, He reminded the people what He had already done: "I bare you on eagles' wings, and brought you unto myself." The voice that commanded was first the voice that rescued (Exodus 19:1-4).

"I am the LORD thy God, which have brought thee out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage."

Exodus 20:2 (KJV)

COVENANT CALLING

At Sinai, God formed a rescued people into a covenant community. Israel was called a "peculiar treasure," "a kingdom of priests," and "an holy nation" (Exodus 19:5-6). In older English, "peculiar" means specially possessed or treasured, not strange. Their calling was not permission for pride, but a vocation of faithful service under the God who declared, "all the earth is mine."

PUBLIC WORDS

Amid thunder, fire, smoke, and the sound of a trumpet, God spoke the covenant words publicly (Exodus 19:16-19; 20:1). They ordered life toward two inseparable duties: faithfulness to God and faithfulness toward one's neighbor.

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A visual guide to the ideas, Scripture, stories, teaching notes, and sources in this station.

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THE THREAD

Faith gives allegiance. Morality forms inward restraint. Law places power under accountability. Education carries truth and memory. Liberty protects conscience and frees people for responsible service.

STATION 3 / 01

A five-part lens

Station 3 Overview



Sinai links worship, character, justice, memory, and responsible freedom.

FAITH	Whom will we worship, trust, and obey?
MORALITY	What kind of heart and character can sustain a free people?
LAW	What places rulers and citizens alike under a standard of justice?
EDUCATION	How does truth become living memory in the next generation?
LIBERTY	What is freedom for, and whose dignity must it protect?

THE SEQUENCE MATTERS

God rescued Israel before He commanded Israel. The law was not the purchase price of freedom; it was the pattern for living as a freed people - faithful to God, just toward neighbor, and responsible for the liberty of others.

HISTORICAL GUARDRAIL

The Sinai covenant was God's covenant with ancient Israel. Biblical faith and moral teaching deeply shaped American language, education, and political reflection, but American law also grew through English common law, colonial charters, natural-law thought, classical sources, and lived constitutional experience. The Sinai covenant had an impactful and intense influence on America's founding generation when developing the Republic.

STATION 3 / 02

Faith | Whom will we worship?

Station 3 | Faith | Primary Texts: Exodus 19:4-6; 20:2-11

*"Thou shalt have no other gods before me."***Exodus 20:3 (KJV)**

Faith at Sinai means undivided allegiance. Israel had been delivered from Pharaoh and was not to exchange one master for an idol. The commands concerning other gods, images, God's name, and the Sabbath teach that worship shapes the whole person - loyalty, speech, imagination, work, and time. The Sabbath also teaches trust: a people once valued only for the bricks they could make were commanded to stop and remember that their worth and provision came from God.

Jesus later gathered the law's direction into love for God and love for neighbor (Matthew 22:37-40). First Peter 2:9 echoes Exodus 19:5-6, describing God's people as "a royal priesthood" and "an holy nation." Election is therefore a calling to witness and service, not a license for superiority.

SUPPORTING STORY 1 | SCRIPTURE STORY**The covenant accepted, broken, and renewed**

At Sinai the people answered, "All that the LORD hath spoken we will do" (Exodus 19:8). Yet while Moses remained on the mountain, they made the golden calf (Exodus 32). The story reveals how quickly fear can trade invisible faith for a visible idol. Moses interceded; God judged the sin, showed mercy, and renewed the covenant (Exodus 32-34). Covenant faith is not sentimental. It requires repentance, intercession, and a return to loyal worship.

Read: Exodus 19:7-8; 32:1-14; 34:1-10

SUPPORTING STORY 2 | HISTORY STORY**Covenant language crosses the Atlantic**

When the Mayflower landed outside the colony's intended patent in 1620, fear of disorder helped move 41 adult men to sign a brief agreement. They promised before God to covenant together into a civil body politic and frame just and equal laws for the general good. A decade later, John Winthrop warned Massachusetts Bay that the colonists had entered a covenant with God for their work. These were not replicas of Sinai - or modern inclusive democracy - but they show how biblical covenant language shaped early New England's imagination of shared duty and accountability.

Read: Mayflower Compact (1620); John Winthrop, A Model of Christian Charity (1630)

FOUNDING VOICE

"Of all the dispositions and habits which lead to political prosperity, Religion and morality are indispensable supports."

George Washington, Farewell Address, September 19, 1796

REFLECT

What helps us remember who God is before we ask what He requires?

STATION 3 / 03

Morality | The law reaches the heart

Station 3 | Morality | Primary Texts: Exodus 20:12-17



"Thou shalt not covet."

Exodus 20:17 (KJV)

The commandments protect the central relationships and goods of community life: parents and children, human life, marriage, property, truth, and contentment. The final command moves beneath visible conduct to desire itself. A court can judge theft or false testimony; God also addresses the envy and appetite from which wrongdoing grows.

Biblical morality is therefore more than outward respectability. It calls for an ordered heart that refuses to treat another person's life, spouse, possessions, labor, or reputation as something to seize. Romans 13:8-10 repeats several commandments and names their center: "Love worketh no ill to his neighbour: therefore love is the fulfilling of the law."

SUPPORTING STORY 3 | SCRIPTURE STORY

Naboth's vineyard - desire becomes public injustice

King Ahab coveted Naboth's vineyard. When Naboth refused to surrender his ancestral inheritance, Queen Jezebel arranged false witnesses, a wrongful conviction, and his death. Ahab then took the property (1 Kings 21). In one narrative, coveting grows into false witness, murder, and theft. The prophet Elijah confronts the throne itself, showing that rank does not place a ruler above moral judgment.

Read: 1 Kings 21:1-24

SUPPORTING STORY 4 | HISTORY STORY**The Founders' problem of self-government**

The American experiment placed unusual weight on citizens governing themselves. Washington linked public prosperity to religion and morality; George Mason's Virginia Declaration of Rights named justice, moderation, temperance, frugality, and virtue as safeguards of liberty. John Adams later warned that constitutional forms cannot control passions left entirely unbridled. Their point was not that good structure is unnecessary, but that structure alone cannot manufacture integrity.

Read: Virginia Declaration of Rights, sec. 15 (1776); Washington (1796); Adams (1798)

FOUNDING VOICE

"Our Constitution was made only for a moral and religious People. It is wholly inadequate to the government of any other."

John Adams to the Massachusetts Militia, October 11, 1798

REFLECT

Which is harder: avoiding a wrongful act, or surrendering the desire that produces it?

STATION 3 / 04

Law | A standard above human power

Station 3 | Law | Primary Texts: Exodus 20:1-17; 24:7

"Thou shalt not bear false witness against thy neighbour."

Exodus 20:16 (KJV)

The Ten Commandments are the covenant's moral core, not the whole civil code of ancient Israel. Detailed case laws follow in Exodus 20:22-23:33, and the covenant is publicly read and ratified in Exodus 24:7. Their brief, direct form places every person under a standard no ruler or majority invents for itself. Life is not ours to destroy, property is not ours to steal, marriage is not ours to violate, and truth is not ours to manipulate.

Deuteronomy later directs Israel's king to copy and read the law so that his heart will not be lifted above his brethren (Deuteronomy 17:18-20). Authority remains accountable. This is a foundational rule-of-law insight: power must answer to a standard beyond its own appetite.

SUPPORTING STORY 5 | HISTORY STORY

Benjamin Franklin argues from Mosaic proportionality

In 1785 Benjamin Franklin opposed making theft a capital crime. Writing to Benjamin Vaughan, he pointed to Exodus 22:1, where theft called for restitution rather than death, and appealed to Mosaic law as "the Dictate of divine Wisdom." Franklin was not proposing that America adopt all of ancient Israel's statutes. He used a concrete biblical law to test whether a modern penalty was proportionate, humane, and directed toward repair.

Read: Benjamin Franklin to Benjamin Vaughan, March 14, 1785

SUPPORTING STORY 6 | HISTORY STORY**Moses among many lawgivers**

The United States Supreme Court building portrays Moses with the tablets among a procession of historic lawgivers that also includes figures from Egypt, Babylon, Greece, Rome, China, and other legal traditions. The artwork makes a careful historical point: Mosaic law belongs within the long memory of law, while American constitutionalism also draws from many streams. The National Archives traces due process especially through Magna Carta and the English law-of-the-land tradition.

Read: U.S. Supreme Court, Courtroom Friezes; National Archives, Magna Carta

FOUNDING VOICE

“No legislative act therefore contrary to the constitution can be valid.”

Alexander Hamilton, The Federalist No. 78, May 28, 1788

KEEP THE DISTINCTION CLEAR

Sinai binds ancient Israel in covenant with God. A constitution is a civil frame made and ratified by a people. Both can teach that authority is limited and accountable, but they are not the same kind of document and should not be collapsed into one another.

REFLECT

What happens to liberty when those with power no longer believe they answer to truth above themselves?

STATION 3 / 05

Education | A people must remember

Station 3 | Education | Primary Texts: Exodus 19:9-11; Deuteronomy 6:6-9



“And thou shalt teach them diligently unto thy children.”

Deuteronomy 6:7 (KJV)

Sinai is also an educational event. The people prepare to hear; God speaks in their hearing; the covenant is written and read publicly. The command to remember shows that truth must become practiced memory. Deuteronomy carries this responsibility into the home: the words are to be taught in ordinary life - sitting, walking, lying down, and rising up.

Biblical education is more than collecting facts. It forms judgment and character through words repeated, questions answered, examples witnessed, and rhythms faithfully practiced. Every generation must learn not only what the commands say, but why worship, truthfulness, fidelity, restraint, work, and rest matter.

SUPPORTING STORY 7 | SCRIPTURE STORY

Josiah and the book that had been forgotten

During repairs to the temple, the priest Hilkiah found the Book of the Law. When it was read to King Josiah, he grieved over the nation's unfaithfulness, gathered the people, read the covenant aloud, and began reform (2 Kings 22-23). A written text had survived, but public memory had failed. Rediscovery became renewal only when the words were heard, understood, and acted upon.

Read: 2 Kings 22:8-13; 23:1-3

SUPPORTING STORY 8 | HISTORY STORY**Literacy, Scripture, and the public school ideal**

Massachusetts Bay's 1647 "Old Deluder Satan" law ordered towns to provide reading instruction so that people would not be kept from knowledge of Scripture; larger towns were to establish grammar schools. In 1787 the Northwest Ordinance joined religion, morality, knowledge, good government, and the encouragement of schools. These early systems were limited and unequal, but they reveal a durable conviction: self-government depends on a people able to read, reason, remember, and judge.

Read: Massachusetts Bay law (1647); Northwest Ordinance, art. 3 (1787)

FOUNDING VOICE

"If a nation expects to be ignorant and free, in a state of civilization, it expects what never was and never will be."

Thomas Jefferson to Charles Yancey, January 6, 1816

REFLECT

What are our habits teaching the next generation, even when we are not deliberately giving a lesson?

STATION 3 / 06

Liberty | Freed for faithful living

Station 3 | Liberty | Primary Texts: Exodus 20:2, 8-11

"I am the LORD thy God, which have brought thee out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage."

Exodus 20:2 (KJV)

The commandments begin with liberation, not prohibition. God rescued Israel before giving the law. Obedience is therefore not the purchase price of freedom; it is the shape of life after bondage. The Sabbath gives this liberty a social dimension: rest must be extended to sons and daughters, servants, livestock, and the stranger within the gates. The person with authority must make room for the rest and dignity of others.

The New Testament preserves this bond between freedom and responsibility: "ye have been called unto liberty; only use not liberty for an occasion to the flesh, but by love serve one another" (Galatians 5:13). Liberty without truth becomes appetite; law without liberty becomes domination. Ordered liberty protects conscience while directing power toward the good of the neighbor.

SUPPORTING STORY 9 | SCRIPTURE STORY

The Hebrew midwives fear God more than Pharaoh

Pharaoh commanded Shiprah and Puah to kill the Hebrew boys at birth. The midwives feared God and refused the king's lethal order, preserving life under the shadow of empire (Exodus 1:15-21). Their quiet courage shows that civil authority is not absolute. When a command requires direct participation in grave injustice, conscience may demand faithful resistance.

Read: Exodus 1:15-21

SUPPORTING STORY 10 | HISTORY STORY

Moses almost appears on the Great Seal

On July 4, 1776, Benjamin Franklin, John Adams, and Thomas Jefferson were appointed to propose a seal for the new nation. Franklin suggested Moses at the Red Sea, with Pharaoh's army overwhelmed, and the motto "Rebellion to Tyrants is Obedience to God." Congress did not adopt the design, and the scene comes from Exodus 14 rather than Sinai. Still, it is a vivid window into the way Exodus supplied political language for deliverance from tyranny.

Read: Benjamin Franklin, Proposed Devices for the Great Seal, August 20, 1776

SUPPORTING STORY 11 | HISTORY STORY

From toleration to an equal right of conscience

In 1785 Virginia considered a tax to support religious teachers. Dissenting citizens and congregations mobilized; James Madison argued that faith must be left to conviction and conscience. Jefferson's Statute for Religious Freedom was enacted in 1786. In 1790, Moses Seixas and Newport's Hebrew congregation welcomed President Washington. Echoing their own words, Washington described a government that gave "to bigotry no sanction, to persecution no assistance." The ideal was not government permission to worship, but equal citizenship and an inherent liberty of conscience.

Read: Madison, Memorial and Remonstrance (1785); Virginia Statute (1786); Washington to Newport (1790)

SUPPORTING STORY 12 | HISTORY STORY

"Go Down, Moses" - Exodus claimed by the enslaved

American professions of liberty coexisted with chattel slavery. Enslaved African Americans heard in Exodus a judgment against bondage and a promise that Pharaoh did not have the last word. At Fort Monroe in 1861, "O Let My People Go," an early form of "Go Down, Moses," was collected among self-emancipated people and soon printed. Harriet Tubman was remembered as a Moses of her people. This story reaches back to the deliverance before Sinai, but completes Sinai's moral arc: a law for freed people rings hollow while neighbors remain in chains.

Read: Library of Congress, Spirituals; National Park Service, African American spiritual traditions

FOUNDING VOICE

"The Religion then of every man must be left to the conviction and conscience of every man."

James Madison, Memorial and Remonstrance Against Religious Assessments, 1785

REFLECT

Does our freedom make room for our neighbor's dignity, truth, worship, rest, and full humanity?

STATION 3 / 07

The Moral Architecture of a Free People

Station 3 | Synthesis and Teaching Notes

The Sinai story joins what modern life often pulls apart. Faith is not merely private feeling. Morality is not merely preference. Law is not merely force. Education is not merely training. Liberty is not merely choice. Together they describe a people learning to live under truth, with responsibility for one another.

The five-part pattern

FAITH	gives allegiance higher than appetite, party, or state.
MORALITY	forms the inward restraint that law alone cannot create.
LAW	gives public shape to justice and places power under accountability.
EDUCATION	carries truth and memory into the next generation.
LIBERTY	protects conscience and frees people for responsible service.

THE CENTRAL TAKEAWAY

A free society cannot live by coercion alone. It needs people capable of truth, restraint, courage, memory, repentance, and love of neighbor. Sinai's enduring question is not only, "What rules must we keep?" It is, "What kind of people are we becoming?"

Deep-history notes

THE DECALOGUE IS CENTRAL, BUT NOT THE WHOLE TORAH.

Exodus 20:1-17 gives the core commands; the covenant legislation continues through Exodus 23 and is ratified in Exodus 24.

TRADITIONS NUMBER THE COMMANDMENTS DIFFERENTLY.

Jewish, Catholic, Lutheran, Orthodox, and Reformed/other Protestant traditions divide the same biblical words in different ways. This guide cites the words and verses rather than depending on a single numbering scheme.

THE KJV PHRASE 'THOU SHALT NOT KILL' IS OFTEN RENDERED 'YOU SHALL NOT MURDER.'

The Hebrew verb in Exodus 20:13 refers to wrongful or unlawful killing; it is not the Bible's general term for every taking of life.

SINAI BELONGS FIRST TO JEWISH HISTORY AND FAITH.

The covenant forms Israel's identity; the giving of Torah is associated with Shavuot. Christian readings should honor that first context even while reading the commandments through Jesus' summary of love for God and neighbor.

AMERICAN INFLUENCE IS REAL, BUT PLURAL.

Biblical language shaped moral teaching, covenant imagery, public education, reform, and political reflection. American constitutional law also arose from many other historical sources. Accuracy strengthens, rather than weakens, the case.

Questions for reflection and discussion

DISCUSS 1

Why does Exodus place deliverance before commandment?

DISCUSS 2

Which commandment most clearly protects a neighbor rather than merely limiting the self?

DISCUSS 3

How do the golden calf and Naboth's vineyard show the movement from inward desire to public harm?

DISCUSS 4

What must education preserve besides information?

DISCUSS 5

Where does ordered liberty differ from both license and coercion?

DISCUSS 6

Which American story in this guide best shows the promise of liberty - and which best exposes its unfinished work?

STATION 3 / 08

References

Station 3 | Sources and Reference Notes

Scripture quotations are from the public-domain King James Version. Historical quotations were checked against primary-source transcriptions or institutional collections. The links below support the stories, quotations, and historical guardrails used in this sheet.

Source titles below are clickable where a web address was provided.

Scripture and biblical context

01	<u>The Holy Bible, King James Version</u> Primary texts: Exodus 1; 19-24; 32-34; Deuteronomy 6 and 17; 1 Kings 21; 2 Kings 22-23; Matthew 22; Romans 13; Galatians 5; James 2; 1 Peter 2.
02	<u>Society for Old Testament Study - Exodus overview</u> Context for the book's structure, covenant, law, and reception.
03	<u>Society for Old Testament Study - Ten Commandments overview</u> Context for covenant setting and differences in numbering traditions.
04	<u>Yale Bible Study - Sinai</u> Exodus, revelation, covenant, and law in their biblical setting.

Founding-era primary sources

05	<u>George Washington, First Inaugural Address, April 30, 1789</u> Founders Online, National Archives.
06	<u>George Washington, Farewell Address, September 19, 1796</u> Founders Online, National Archives.
07	<u>John Adams to the Massachusetts Militia, October 11, 1798</u> Founders Online, National Archives.
08	<u>John Adams, Report of a Constitution for Massachusetts, 1779</u> Civic covenant, rule of law, and education.
09	<u>Benjamin Franklin to Benjamin Vaughan, March 14, 1785</u> Franklin's appeal to Exodus 22 and proportional punishment.
10	<u>Benjamin Franklin, Proposed Devices for the Great Seal, August 20, 1776</u> Moses, the Red Sea, and revolutionary Exodus imagery; the proposal was not adopted.
11	<u>Alexander Hamilton, The Federalist No. 78, May 28, 1788</u> Fundamental constitutional law restrains legislative power.

12	<u>Thomas Jefferson to Charles Yancey, January 6, 1816</u> Thomas Jefferson Papers, Library of Congress.
13	<u>James Madison, Memorial and Remonstrance Against Religious Assessments, 1785</u> Religious duty, conviction, and equal rights of conscience.
14	<u>Thomas Jefferson, A Bill for Establishing Religious Freedom, 1779</u> Enacted by Virginia in 1786.
15	<u>George Washington to the Hebrew Congregation in Newport, August 18, 1790</u> Equal liberty of conscience and citizenship.
16	<u>Virginia Declaration of Rights, June 12, 1776</u> Sections 15-16 on virtue and free exercise.

Historical stories and interpretive context

17	<u>Library of Congress - The 400th Anniversary of the Mayflower Compact</u> Text and careful explanation of the civil body politic.
18	<u>National Park Service - The Puritans</u> Biblical reading, Massachusetts Bay, and the limits of Puritan governance.
19	<u>John Winthrop, A Model of Christian Charity (1630)</u> Primary-source text with covenant context.
20	<u>Massachusetts - "Old Deluder Satan" Law of 1647</u> Official transcription of the early school law.
21	<u>Library of Congress - Religion and the Congress of the Confederation</u> Includes the Northwest Ordinance and its education clause.
22	<u>Library of Congress - Religion and the Founding of the American Republic</u> Broad institutional overview of faith, founding, establishment, and free exercise.
23	<u>National Archives - Magna Carta and its American legacy</u> English law-of-the-land and due-process lineage.
24	<u>Supreme Court of the United States - Courtroom Friezes</u> Moses within a multi-civilizational procession of lawgivers.
25	<u>Library of Congress - Spirituals</u> African American spirituals and the history of enslavement.
26	<u>Library of Congress - "O Let My People Go" at Fort Monroe</u> Early published form of the spiritual collected among self-emancipated people in 1861.
27	<u>Library of Congress - Marian Anderson's Spirituals and "Go Down, Moses"</u> Exodus imagery, slavery, resistance, and Harriet Tubman.

28	<u>National Park Service - African American spirituals and Old Testament liberation</u> Identification with Moses leading Israel out of slavery.
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29	<u>National Park Service - Harriet Tubman</u> Historical context for Tubman as the "Moses" of her people.
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Accuracy note

30	<u>George Washington's Mount Vernon - Spurious Quotations</u> Verification resource.
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31	<u>Monticello - 'Bible, Source of Liberty' (Spurious Quotation)</u> Verification resource.
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