

STUDIES IN EXODUS

by Robert C. Walton

EXODUS I

Introduction and Exodus 1

The book of Exodus is a record of God's fulfillment of the covenant promises He had made to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob in the book of Genesis. Within its pages we find God delivering the Israelites from Egypt under the leadership of Moses, confirming the covenant with the people at Mount Sinai, and introducing the forms of worship by which they are to enter His presence. Thus we see that the book of Exodus treats much that is central to the life of the Christian - the basis for his relationship to God through redemption, covenant, and worship.

It is obviously impossible to cover the book in any detail in a mere thirteen weeks. Instead, we will seek to focus on the great themes and principles of the book while assuming a basic familiarity with the narrative itself. It is through these great themes that the significance of the book for Christians today should become clear.

GENERAL INTRODUCTION - THE DATE OF THE EXODUS

The usual topics covered in the general introduction to a book of the Bible - authorship, date, and purpose - in the case of Exodus resolve themselves into one. The authorship of the book is obvious. The five books of the Pentateuch have been ascribed to Moses since the earliest records of the Jewish people. Though it has been fashionable to deny the Mosaic authorship of the Pentateuch since at least the time of Julius Wellhausen in the late nineteenth century, all who do so fly openly in the face of all biblical evidence, and thus align themselves with those who deny the inerrancy and authority of Scripture. The purpose of the book is equally clear - it is a record of God's deliverance of Israel and the establishment of His covenant with the nation. Thus the one real controversy surrounding the book of Exodus is the question of when it was written, or more appropriately, when the exodus from Egypt actually occurred.

Two popular views of this question have developed over the years. The first of these proposes a date for the exodus in the middle of the fifteenth century (more specifically, 1445 B.C.), while the second suggests that the exodus occurred near the beginning of the thirteenth century (around 1290 B.C.). We will look at both options in the light of three major lines of evidence - those provided by the recorded history of Egypt, archaeological discoveries in Palestine, and the chronological indicators found in the Bible itself.

1. THE HISTORY OF EGYPT

The great Egyptian civilization is divided into a series of dynasties. In relationship to the date of the Exodus, the key dynasties are the fifteenth and sixteenth (about 1730-1570), during which Egypt was ruled by a group of Semitic invaders known as the Hyksos. Those who argue for the early date of the exodus believe that the Hyksos were those referred to in Exodus 1:8, new rulers who did not know Joseph and thus had no respect for the Israelites (the Egyptian abhorrence of shepherds mentioned in Genesis supports this view, since the Hyksos were themselves a sheep-herding people).

Those who prefer a late date for the exodus see the Hyksos as the ones during whose reign Joseph came to power, and argue that Semitic usurpers would be more likely to elevate a fellow Semite than native Egyptians would be. Furthermore, they go on to argue that the enslavement of the Israelites would then coincide with the ejection of the Hyksos from the land and the rise to power of a new native Egyptian dynasty.

A second argument drawn from Egyptian history involves the length of reign required by the fact that Moses had to remain in Midian for forty years before those who sought his life had died (2:23). Only two pharaohs in the middle of the second millennium B.C. had reigns long enough to qualify as this “pharaoh of the oppression” - Thutmose III (1501-1447) and Rameses II (1300-1234). We will see, however, that any chronology based upon the reign of the latter faces insuperable problems.

The third argument relates to the names of the treasure cities that the Israelites were engaged in building - Pithom and Rameses (Exodus 1:11). Late-date advocates argue that such cities must have been built during the reign of Rameses II in honor of himself. Both names, however, have roots in Hyksos worship and could have been used long before the reign of the great pharaoh.

A fourth argument concerns the candidates for “pharaoh of the exodus” - Amenhotep II (1447-1421) and Merneptah (1234-1225). Here the evidence strongly supports the early date for the exodus. Amenhotep II followed in the footsteps of his father Thutmose III, a great military leader whose mighty army rode its chariots far and wide to conquer and subdue surrounding peoples. Yet Amenhotep’s reign gives little evidence of military activity; only a few minor campaigns are mentioned, despite the notorious penchant for exaggeration displayed by the pharaohs of Egypt and their court scribes. Could this have been because the cream of the crop of his warriors and war machines wound up at the bottom of the Red Sea? Furthermore, the Dream Stela of Thutmose IV, the successor of Amenhotep II, provides interesting corroboration. While Thutmose was still a young prince, he had a dream in which the Sphinx told him that he would become king, and that in return he should undertake the project of cleaning the sand away from the Sphinx, which by this time was nearly buried. Such a dream would only have had significance if Thutmose at the time had no expectation of becoming the ruler of Egypt. Could he have become first in line to the throne when his elder brother died in the tenth plague?

Merneptah’s candidacy, on the other hand, has been rendered impossible by the discovery of a stela known as the Israel Stela from the fifth year of his reign (1229). The artifact refers to the Israelites as one of the nations vanquished during his incursion into Palestine. But if Israel was well-established in Palestine in 1229, Merneptah’s reign could not have been the time of the exodus. As a result, those who favor a late date point to Rameses II as the pharaoh of the exodus and argue that the time periods involved are symbolic rather than literal. We will see more of this when we examine the biblical evidence.

2. ARCHAEOLOGICAL DISCOVERIES IN PALESTINE

The key indicators here are the archaeological digs at the sites associated with Israel's conquest of the land under Joshua. The digs at Jericho have been the most publicized as well as the most problematic. John Garstang explored the site of Jericho extensively in the early 1930s and concluded that "City D" gave evidence of having been destroyed around 1400 B.C. (ancient cities were rebuilt on their own ruins, leaving large mounds known as tells; archaeologists thus are able to find successive cities on the same location by digging downward). Garstang also found that the walls of the city consisted of large stones that had toppled outward under the impact of an earthquake, though Kathleen Kenyon later argued that these walls belonged to an earlier settlement than that of City D. Objections to Garstang's conclusions have largely been based on a predisposition in favor of the later date, however.

That predisposition usually finds its source in the discoveries of archaeologists at other cities associated with the conquest, such as Lachish, Debir, and Bethel. All three give evidence of destruction by fire in the latter part of the thirteenth century, which would fit rather neatly with the late date of the exodus. It would also fit rather neatly with the Merneptah stela, of course - especially since the book of Joshua says nothing about the Israelites destroying any of these cities. Thus what archaeologists have found is the result of a destruction of these cities by Egypt under Merneptah, not by the Israelites under Joshua.

Archaeologists also argued for many years that no evidence had ever been discovered to support the existence of the tribes of Moab, Ammon, and Edom in southern Palestine in the fifteenth century B.C. More recent excavations have uncovered cities in the region in the fourteenth century, however, making the existence of nomadic tribes in the region in the previous century highly credible.

3. CHRONOLOGICAL INDICATORS IN SCRIPTURE

The most important evidence for the date of the exodus comes from Scripture itself, however. In addition to the verses surrounding the chronology of the life of Moses that have already been noted, I Kings 6:1 tells us that Solomon's Temple was dedicated 480 years after the exodus, and Judges 11:26 indicates that 300 years had passed since the conquest of the land under Joshua. Since Solomon dedicated the Temple around 965 B.C. and Jephthah lived around 1100 B.C., both passages point toward an early date for the exodus, around 1445 B.C. In addition, the chronology of the Judges can fit into a period of 300 years (between the deaths of Joshua and the elders and the accession of Saul) allotted by the early date of the exodus, but cannot possibly fit into the 150 years permitted by the later date.

The bottom line, then, is that those who espouse the late date for the exodus do so only by ignoring the clear chronological evidence of Scripture. This is merely one more way in which the world, determined to deny the authority of God's Word, seeks an alternative explanation despite the fact that the evidence used to support that explanation turns out to be seriously flawed (even Cecil

B. DeMille fell for this - Yul Brenner's character, the pharaoh of the exodus in *The Ten Commandments*, is referred to as Rameses).

EXODUS 1

Given the background of our introductory discussion, then, let's move on to look briefly at the first chapter of the book of Exodus. The chapter begins by noting that Israel entered Egypt numbering little more than seventy people, and during the years of captivity (Exodus 12:40 says that the captivity lasted 430 years) grew to the size of a nation - six hundred thousand fighting men (12:37), suggesting a population of about two million (note, however, that some scholars believe the word *thousand* has been mistranslated - it can also mean *clan* or *troop*, which would yield a number much closer to 25,000 than two million - see Colin J. Humphreys, *The Number of People in the Exodus from Egypt: Decoding Mathematically the Very Large Numbers in Numbers I and XXVI*; his hypothesis is credible and actually fits the biblical evidence better than the translation "thousand").

Verses 8-14 describe the transition that occurred at the time of the Hyksos invasion. While the Israelites were hardly sufficiently numerous to pose a threat to the Egyptians, they were large enough in number to appear threatening to the relatively small Hyksos population - especially if they were to link up with the native Egyptians, their former allies, and, in the process of driving the Hyksos out, gain freedom from the slavery imposed by the usurpers. We have already noted that the names of the treasure cities correspond to deities honored by the Hyksos.

When the Egyptians did manage to drive out the Hyksos, however, it brought on a wave of anti-foreign sentiment. Not only were the Hyksos expelled, but the Israelites continued to be viewed with suspicion and oppressed, to such an extent that the Hebrew midwives were ordered to destroy any male babies born to Israelite women (verses 15-22). The pharaoh - Thutmose III by this time - obviously was more concerned with limiting the military potential of these foreigners within his borders than he was with profiting from their slave labor. The midwives, however, bravely obeyed God and were honored for their obedience. The order with which chapter one concludes provides an ironic preview of what is to follow.

CONCLUSION

What, then, are we to conclude from our brief study of Exodus 1? First of all, we should note that those who wish to deny the Word of God do so, not because of the evidence, but despite the evidence. Rejection of God and His Word is not an intellectual problem, but a moral one. This is true whether the issue is the date of the exodus, the authorship of the Pentateuch, or the creation of the world.

Secondly, we have begun to see that the book of Exodus records the fact that our God keeps His promises. He told Abraham that He would make of him a great nation. In Exodus 1, we have seen that happen, at least in terms of the number of the Israelites. Four hundred years may be a long

time on the human scale, but for a God who does not change and does not forget, it is merely a phase of His great plan.

Thirdly, we see in this chapter that God accomplishes His purposes through people who are willing to serve Him in the face of serious opposition. The courage of the midwives is a mere prelude to the leadership shown by Moses in the chapters to follow, but one need not lead tens of thousands in order to be judged faithful.

STUDIES IN EXODUS II

Moses' Early Years - Exodus 2

Last week we looked at a general introduction to the book of Exodus and related the history of Egypt to the narrative with which the book opens. All of this set the stage for the emergence of the key figure of the book of Exodus - Moses, the man used by God to deliver Israel from Egyptian bondage and proclaim to them the details of His covenant. In today's passage, we will see the birth and early life of Moses, including the events that God used to prepare him for the great task that he was to undertake at the advanced age of eighty.

THE BIRTH OF MOSES (2:1-10)

The context for the birth of Moses was established at the end of chapter one. Pharaoh Thutmose III, ruling a nation in the throes of a period of anti-foreign reaction and fearful that the Israelites might pose a military threat in their midst (though surely their fears of the military potential of the Israelites were grossly exaggerated), had ordered that all male Israelite babies were to be killed. He had been unable to get the Israelite midwives to comply with his order, so instead required that male babies be thrown into the Nile.

- Verse 1 - The names of Moses' parents are said to be Amram and Jochebed in Exodus 6:20, Numbers 26:59, and I Chronicles 23:13.
- Verses 2-4 - Jochebed attempted to hide her child from the authorities, but could only safely do this for three months. She then entrusted him to the Lord by preparing a waterproof craft and placing him in the Nile, in technical compliance with Pharaoh's order. Hebrews 11:23 commends her faith in so doing. How many of us would be willing to put our faith to such an extreme test, especially where the life of our child was at stake?
- Verses 5-6 - The daughter of Thutmose III mentioned here may well have been Hatshepsut, who ruled Egypt for almost twenty years as regent on her father's behalf in his old age. Here we see that Jochebed's faith is rewarded in a way she could not have envisioned, as one of the most powerful women in the land finds and has compassion on the crying infant.
- Verses 7-9 - Miriam shows her quick wits here, offering to find a nurse for the child. Nursing was considered beneath the dignity of upper-class women in Egypt, and it was common practice for them to hire wet nurses to see to the needs of their children. A Hebrew woman would have been a natural choice in this situation, and Miriam quickly fetches her own mother. Jochebed thus was able to nurse and raise her son openly, under the protection of the royal family, and get paid for it as well. When we leave things in God's hands, He is certainly able to provide for our needs beyond our wildest expectations.
- Verse 10 - In ancient times, children were not weaned until the age of four or five. Thus Jochebed had the opportunity to teach her son the ways of his people and introduce him to

the God of Israel. It must have been hard for her to take him to the palace and leave him in the hands of the princess, but she continued to trust God to care for her child. Hatshepsut named the child, as was her right, choosing a name that reflected the circumstances under which the baby had come to her attention. Moses himself grew up in the house of Pharaoh, enjoying all the privileges associated with the most powerful kingdom in the world of that day, including the best education available. This served as the first stage of Moses' preparation for leading the people of God, and lasted for about forty years.

THE YEARS IN MIDIAN (2:11-25)

As some commentators have noted, Moses spent forty years learning all the world had to teach him in Egypt, then forty years *unlearning* it all in the desert of Midian. At the turning point in his life recorded at the end of Exodus 2, Moses was educated, but he was not yet wise. One who was to lead God's people out of Egypt needed to be both.

- Verse 11 - What we see here is Moses' identification with his people rather than the people of Egypt. His mother had trained him well in the four or five years to which she had access to his young mind.
- Verse 12 - Once Moses saw himself as an Israelite rather than an Egyptian, he began to think in terms of using his position to act on behalf of his people. But it was not God's intention that worldly power or rash acts of violence be the means by which the Israelites gained their freedom.
- Verses 13-15 - Moses' attempts to take things into his own hands backfired. Not only did his actions fail to gain him the respect of the Israelites, but they turned Thutmose against him. He was forced to flee for his life into the desert regions north of Egypt - the Sinai peninsula, inhabited by roving bands of nomads like the Midianites, distant relatives of the seed of Abraham through Abraham's second wife, Keturah. Hebrews 11:24-27 tells us that Moses' actions in leaving Egypt were deliberate and spiritually motivated, not simply a response of fear.
- Verses 16-20 - In Midian, Moses encounters a group of young women watering the flocks of their father (called a priest of Midian; the worship of the Midianites was the same type of disgraceful idolatry practiced by other Canaanite tribes, though Moses' father-in-law later was quite willing to acknowledge the God of Israel as worthy of a high place in his pantheon - see Exodus 18) - according to the practice of the time, this was women's work. When they are harassed by a group of shepherds, Moses chases the shepherds away and draws water for the women. When they tell their father Reuel what happened (his dress and speech made them think he was an Egyptian), he insists that they invite the man home for dinner (hospitality, then as now, was considered a sacred obligation in the Near East).

- Verses 21-22 - Moses settled down and became part of the family of Reuel, marrying his daughter Zipporah and giving birth to a son Gershom, whose name was descriptive of Moses' standing as an alien in a foreign land.
- Verses 23-25 - Moses remained in Midian for about forty years (he died at the age of 120, and the Israelites wandered in the wilderness for forty years, so he must have been about 80 at the time of the exodus), until the death of Thutmose III. Meanwhile, the Israelites were crying out to God in the midst of their oppression, and God was hearing their prayers.

What was it that Moses had learned in these eighty years of preparation for the work to which God was going to call him? In Egypt, he learned the greatest knowledge the world had to offer, but above all he learned the inner workings of the Egyptian court. When the time came, he could enter that court without fear and represent his people and his God. Secondly, in the years in Egypt Moses gained the literary skills that would enable him to pen the Pentateuch - the first five books of the Bible, which play such an important role in God's self-revelation.

In Midian, Moses learned the skills needed to survive in the desert. If he was going to be called upon to lead his people through the wilderness, those survival skills would come in handy. But more importantly, in the desert Moses learned humility. The man who cautiously approaches the burning bush in Exodus 3 is a far cry from the brash self-styled deliverer who murders the Egyptian taskmaster in Exodus 2. The meekness displayed by Moses, and learned during those years of exile, played a major role in enabling him to deal with the enormous frustrations he faced in leading a fractious horde of twenty-five thousand souls through the desert for forty years. Such skills are equally necessary for leadership in the church today.

STUDIES IN EXODUS III

The Call of Moses - Exodus 3:1-4:17

We saw last week how God prepared Moses in his early years for the work He had for him to do. He gained knowledge in Egypt, then gained humility in the desert of Midian. Now that educated but humbled man is ready to lead God's people out of Egypt. God appears to Moses in a burning bush at Mount Horeb (also known as Mount Sinai) and commissions him to do the task, but Moses responds with a series of objections. It is around those objections that today's lesson will be structured.

GOD'S COMMISSION (3:1-10)

- Verse 1 - The different names assigned to Moses' father-in-law (Reuel in Exodus 2, Jethro here and in Exodus 18, and Hobab in Judges 4:11) may reflect different names by which the same person was known, but more likely reflect the generic ambiguity of the term translated *father-in-law*. It was used to describe any male relative by marriage, and thus could refer to one's wife's father, grandfather, or even brother, for example.
- Verse 2 - The *angel of the Lord* who appears to Moses in the burning bush is not a created being, but a theophany, most likely a pre-incarnate form of the Second Person of the Trinity (see, for example, Judges 13:18 cf. Isaiah 9:6). Moses' worshipful attitude is thus quite appropriate.
- Verse 3 - Despite various attempts to explain what Moses saw in the desert (plants that emit flammable gas, plants with red leaves or berries, etc.), we must assert that the phenomenon of the burning bush was supernatural in nature. After all, Moses had been tending sheep in the wilderness for forty years, and there would have been few natural secrets of the desert with which he would have been unfamiliar.
- Verses 4-6 - Is this how we feel when we enter the presence of God?
- Verses 7-10 - God both hears the prayers of His people and keeps His promises. He also normally works through people, and here He indicates that Moses is the one chosen to be the instrument through whom God will liberate His people from Egyptian bondage.

MOSES' OBJECTIONS (3:11-4:17)

Moses may have been humbled by his forty years tending sheep in the desert, but there is a vast difference between humility and lack of faith. Moses had not yet learned that difference, and consequently raises a series of objections before consenting to undertake the task.

1. THE WORTHINESS OF THE MESSENGER (3:11-12)

Moses' humility is immediately apparent (one can hardly imagine him responding with these words had God spoken to him at the age of forty), but the real question is not who Moses is, but who God is. Moses' worthiness is irrelevant as long as he experiences the presence of God.

2. THE IDENTITY OF THE CALLER (3:13-22)

- Verse 13 - The Name of God is a matter of importance because of the significance of names in the cultural framework of the ancient world. Names defined character - to know a person's name was, in a sense, to know the character of that person.
- Verses 14-15 - The Name given here by God - YHWH, the Hebrew Tetragrammaton, generally rendered as Yahweh or (mistakenly) Jehovah - is an obscure form of the Hebrew verb *to be* and indicates the self-existent nature of the God of Israel. This name is characteristically used in Scripture when speaking of God in covenant relationship with His people. God then makes it clear that He is the same God who made a covenant with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, the patriarchs of the Hebrew people - a covenant that He now intends to fulfill.
- Verses 16-22 - God does not leave Moses in ignorance about the results of his actions. He makes it clear that the elders of Israel will acknowledge Moses' authority and mission, but that Pharaoh (by this time Amenhotep II) will resist the request to take a journey into the wilderness to worship, that force on the part of God will be required, and that Israel will ultimately escape with the riches of Egypt. Thus Moses knew from the beginning the general course that his mission would follow.

3. THE POWER OF THE MESSAGE (4:1-9)

- Verse 1 - Moses' concern returns to his own weakness again. This time, the problem seems to be that he doubts that the message itself has the power to sway the elders of Israel, despite the fact that God had already assured him that they would listen (3:18). God then gives him three signs, intended to convince both the elders of Israel and the officials of Egypt. All three carry symbolic significance.
- Verses 2-5 - The staff was a mark of authority, carried by the pharaoh as one of his insignia of office. The serpent figured prominently in the royal crown. This sign thus communicates God's power over the pharaoh.
- Verses 6-7 - Leprosy is consistently a punishment for pride, inflicted upon one who takes upon himself divinely-appointed prerogatives (see, for instance, Numbers 12:10). The punishment involves isolation from the presence of God. Pharaoh will thus be punished for his high-handed treatment of God's people, as well as for having the temerity to assert his own divinity.

- Verses 8-9 - The third sign strikes at the heart of Egypt's economic prosperity, showing that God has control over the great river and its life-giving water, while at the same time presaging the plagues.

4. THE ABILITY OF THE MESSENGER (4:10-12)

Moses' excuses are becoming increasingly desperate and far-fetched. He certainly would have learned rhetoric in Egypt, since the Egyptians greatly valued the power of persuasive and eloquent speech; maybe Moses thought he was out of practice after forty years in the desert, with mostly sheep with whom to converse. But God again brings Moses' attention back where it belongs - to Himself. If God gives him the words and the power, Moses' rhetorical skills are irrelevant.

5. THE WILLINGNESS OF THE MESSENGER (4:13-17)

Moses, now out of excuses, finally just tries to beg off and convince God to get somebody else. Despite God's anger, He agrees to give Moses the confidence boost he seems to require by appointing Aaron as Moses' mouthpiece. It is worth noting, however, that the "mouthpiece" is rarely used, and that by the time we arrive at the book of Deuteronomy, facility of speech is obviously no longer one of Moses' shortcomings.

CONCLUSION

The major lesson to be drawn from this passage is that our usefulness to God does not depend on our ability, but on our willingness to be used. God's authority, not ours, makes people listen, and God's power, not ours, brings results. The greatest powers on earth cannot stand before one who stands in the presence of God, speaks with His authority, and acts in His strength.

STUDIES IN EXODUS IV

The Plagues - Exodus 7-11

Anyone who has grown up in a Bible-believing church has been familiar with the story of Moses and the plagues since childhood. Because of this, the goal of this lesson is not to review the narrative of the events leading up to the exodus, but to examine related questions that will draw us deeper into the purpose of the story and bring us to some useful applications.

WHAT WERE THE PLAGUES?

The acts of judgment that God visited on the Egyptians are described using various terms in Scripture. In different places within and outside the Pentateuch they are referred to as wonders, signs, plagues (only once - Exodus 9:14), diseases, strokes, and blows. The varying terms used within the narrative itself have, of course, become an excuse for liberal critics to carve up the text among alleged sources, but the unity of the narrative is transparent, as we will see below when we examine its structure. In any case, the terms used to describe these events indicate that they were unusual acts of power and judgment brought upon Pharaoh and the Egyptians by the God of Israel.

NATURAL OR SUPERNATURAL?

Some have argued that the events described in Exodus 7-11 may be accounted for through a natural sequence of developments flowing from an unusual flooding of the Nile, as follows:

- 1 - The first of the plagues would thus involve an unusually heavy flood, bringing with it red clay from Ethiopia and red algae that would kill the fish in the river and make it undrinkable.
- 2 - The second plague would then occur as the frogs deserted the river in droves, driven out by the algae and decomposing fish.
- 3 - The third plague (the type of insect is uncertain, since the Hebrew word is found only in this location) would then have involved mosquitoes breeding in the stagnant pools left behind by the flood waters.
- 4 - The swarms of flies would have been drawn by the rotting fish and frogs.
- 5 - The flies were carriers of anthrax, which then would have infected the cattle of the land.
- 6 - When the same flies that had infected the cattle began to bite people, the anthrax would have been transmitted, producing a skin infection in humans.
- 7 - Hailstorms could be devastating to crops; the crops destroyed by this particular storm indicate that it took place in January or February.

8 - Locusts eat everything in sight, and the damp conditions created by the earlier flooding of the Nile could have produced an unusually bountiful crop of them.

9 - The darkness may have been caused by the *khamsin*, a dust storm that could have been intensified by the red earth left from the flooding and the dry soil that was exposed in the wake of the devastation wrought by the locusts. Three-day storms of this type are not unknown in the region.

10 - If this was pestilence, as some have suggested, it was a highly selective one.

There is nothing inherently wrong with this scenario. It only becomes a problem when someone uses it to attempt to deny the supernatural nature of the events recorded in Exodus 7-11. The fact that God may have used natural means to accomplish His works of judgment on the Egyptians in no way mitigates against the fact that it was *God* who was acting. Even if these were natural, the timing (in relationship to the words and actions of Moses), intensity (certainly beyond normal occurrences of this type), and selectivity (Goshen being spared the worst of the plagues, and of course the tenth plague striking only the firstborn of those who did not protect themselves with the blood of the Passover lamb) bear the unmistakable hand of God.

THE STRUCTURE OF THE NARRATIVE

It has often been noted that the ten plagues may be divided into three groups of three, as follows:

ANNOYANCE	DESTRUCTION	DEATH
water to blood	flies	hail
frogs	anthrax	locusts
mosquitoes	boils	darkness

The plagues thus increase in severity as the Lord increases the pressure on Pharaoh to release the Israelites. It is also worth noting that the first plague in each of these groups was announced by Moses to Pharaoh early in the morning as he went down to the Nile, the second was announced to Pharaoh in his palace, and the third came without prior warning.

Also, each group had a stated purpose, spoken by Moses when the first plague in each group was announced. The first set was intended so that Pharaoh would “know that I am the Lord” (7:17), the second set so that he would “know that I, the Lord, am in this land” (8:22), and the third set so that he would “know that there is no one like me in all the earth” (9:14). The literary structure of the narrative demonstrates, not its artificiality, as the work of a later redactor, but its unity, as the work of one hand - that of Moses.

GOD AGAINST THE GODS

From the very beginning, Pharaoh issued a challenge to the God of Israel. He refused to listen to this god of whom he had no knowledge, and was convinced that the mighty gods of Egypt, as represented by the Egyptian magicians and preeminently by Pharaoh himself, could withstand any threat mouthed by the spokesmen of this unknown foreign deity. It has often been noted, therefore, that the plagues were of such a nature that they challenged the gods of Egypt, not only by defeating their representatives, but by devastating their domains. While those who have sought to emphasize this correspondence have not always been able to match specific gods to specific plagues in any conclusive manner, the following may be instructive:

1 - The Nile river was the lifeblood of Egypt. Its annual flooding deposited rich soil along its banks, providing the foundation for Egyptian prosperity and even life itself. This dependence on the Nile was reflected in Egyptian religion. The Nile was pictured as the bloodstream of the god Osiris, while the god Hapi was a personification of the annual flood waters and Khnum was revered as the guardian of the great river. The first plague thus polluted the lifeblood of Osiris, rendered the rotund Hapi surly, and left Khnum helpless to ward off the deprivations of the plague. The Egyptians were comforted somewhat (for all the good it did), however, when their priests could duplicate the feat. Maybe their gods were simply angry with them for some reason.

2 - The goddess Heqet was the patron deity of childbirth and took the form of a frog (a fertility symbol somewhat equivalent in Egypt to the way we think of rabbits). This wasn't quite the type of fertility Egyptians wanted, however, and the priests of Egypt only made matters worse by attempting to duplicate the feat.

3-4 - There are no convincing suggestions for gods who were attacked by the plagues of mosquitoes and flies, though some have suggested that the fourth plague involved scarab beetles. While these were destructive, they would have been no threat to cattle.

5 - Like the Nile river, cattle were a major part of the Egyptian economy, and thus appeared frequently in their worship. Hathor, the goddess of love, took the form of a cow; the god Ptah had a sacred Apis bull, which was venerated to such an extent that it was embalmed and buried in its own sarcophagus at death; and the city of Heliopolis had its own sacred bull-god, Mnevis. All were unable to protect themselves against the wrath of Yahweh.

6 - Imhotep was the Egyptian god of medicine; it was common for ashes to be thrown into the air in a ceremony to end an attack of pestilence. This time, Imhotep is powerless to prevent a pestilence sent by the God of Israel.

7 - Nut was the Egyptian sky goddess, but could do nothing to prevent this devastation rained down from on high by the Lord.

8 - Seth was the god and protector of crops, but could do nothing to save the Egyptians from the devastation of the locusts.

9 - The most powerful gods of Egypt were the sun gods. Amon-Ra, Aten, and Horus were all related to the sun in one way or another. Amon-Ra was the patron god of Egypt and was believed to be the divine father of Pharaoh himself, but Yahweh showed that the Egyptian deity had no power to prevent the judgments of God.

10 - After challenging Pharaoh's father, God attacks his son. The pharaohs of Egypt were thought to be divine, and here the Lord undermines the very heart of their religion.

THE HARDENING OF PHARAOH'S HEART

One final point should be made in connection with the plagues. God had told Moses at the burning bush that Pharaoh would harden his heart and would only let the people go after demonstrations of great power by the hand of the Lord. Commentators have often noted that there is a transition in the language used to describe this hardening as the plagues progress. After the first five plagues, we are told that "Pharaoh hardened his heart," but after the latter plagues, the text tells us that "the Lord hardened Pharaoh's heart." This alteration in language not only underscores the sovereignty of God over the hearts of men, but also serves to illustrate such difficult New Testament passages as Matthew 12:31-32 and Hebrews 6:4-8.

CONCLUSION

What can we learn, then, from the plagues that God sent upon the Egyptians? First of all, we see that God's love is a discerning love. When He judged His enemies, He also protected His people. In fact, the same mighty acts of God that destroyed the Egyptians were the ones that delivered the Israelites.

Secondly, we see the great importance of the First Commandment. No other gods may stand in the presence of the one true God and survive the encounter. This is true whether the false gods inhabit our nation or our own lives.

Thirdly, the narrative should serve as a warning to us of the hardness that can so easily possess our own hearts. We all know that the Israelites who were the beneficiaries of these great works of God were soon complaining over trifles, doubting both their God and the leaders He had put over them. Are not the works that He has done for us even greater than these? We need to be reminded often, so that we don't fall into the same trap of unbelief.

STUDIES IN EXODUS V

The Passover - Exodus 12:1-13:16

One of the defining experiences in the history of Israel was the Passover - the last of the plagues leading to the departure of the Israelites from Egypt. While the event stands alone as one of great importance to the Israelites, its significance to us is much greater because of the symbolism through which it points to the saving work of Christ and the greater deliverance He accomplished on the cross.

PREPARATION FOR THE PASSOVER

The preparations for the Passover are by now familiar to most Christians - the choosing of the lamb, the preparation of unleavened bread, the sacrifice of the lamb, the sprinkling of the blood on the doorposts and lintel of the house, the roasting of the lamb, the eating of the Passover meal in haste, and the burning of all that remained of the meal.

The preparations point to two main ideas - purity and speed. The fact that the lamb had to be spotless and the sprinkling of blood around the entrance to the house both relate to the idea of purification. Only that which is pure can serve as a covering for sin, and the sprinkled blood symbolized the purification of the entire dwelling in which the Israelite families gathered for safety.

Everything else pointed to the need to move fast. The lamb was to be prepared in the simplest possible way - by roasting it whole (eating it raw would have been faster, but was reminiscent of an Egyptian festival in which raw meat was consumed, while boiling would have required taking the time to skin and eviscerate the carcass). The "bitter herbs" - probably lettuce, chicory, and others - were easily obtained and could be used as seasoning with no prior modification. The most time-consuming aspect of making bread is allowing it to rise, so the use of unleavened bread was an obvious time-saver. That the meal was to be eaten with staff in hand, robe tucked into the belt, and sandals on the feet shows that the people were to be ready to move on a moment's notice.

Some have seen in the ritual surrounding the Passover echoes of similar observances practiced by nomadic tribes in the Eastern Mediterranean. Sacrifices were common, of course, as were spring harvest festivals, and the sprinkling of blood was practiced in other contexts as a means of warding off evil spirits. The fact that similar practices existed among other groups at the same time in no way mitigates against the significance of the Passover, however. The practices themselves may not have been unique to Israel, but the meaning with which those practices were invested was peculiarly suited to the experience of the Israelites in their relationship to the God who kept His promises and delivered them from bondage in Egypt.

THE TENTH PLAGUE AND THE EXODUS

Like the KJV translation of παρακλητος as "Comforter" in the Gospel of John, the translation of פסח as "Passover" is less than adequate to convey the full significance of the term. What is being pictured here is far more than the passive idea of ignoring the houses that had blood sprinkled around their entrances. Instead, the concept is one of active protection (see Isaiah 31:5). God came down and protected His people from the destroying angel, interposing Himself between His children and the agent of death. The sprinkling of blood was thus more than a signal - it was the means of purifying the house to prepare it for the presence of the Lord Himself.

Exodus 12:12 makes explicit one of the issues we discussed last week - the fact that the plagues were directed against the deities of the Egyptians, and in particular against the cult of Pharaoh himself. With regard to the tenth plague in particular, it is reminiscent of the Egyptian Sed festival, in which the divine Pharaoh was to pass throughout the land of Egypt (usually in symbolic form) while all the gods of Egypt paid him homage. Instead it is Yahweh who passes through the land of Egypt, destroying the firstborn of all who fail to worship Him, including the firstborn of the divine Pharaoh himself.

The firstborn, not only in Scripture, but in the culture of the Ancient Near East generally, was taken to symbolize all of what followed. Thus firstborn animals were frequently sacrificed in fertility rituals, and it was not uncommon in pagan cultures for firstborn children to be sacrificed in the same way. God is thus asserting His authority over all life in Egypt, both human and animal - an authority claimed by the divine Pharaoh alone.

The tenth plague was the last straw. Not only did Pharaoh allow the Israelites to leave Egypt, but sent them away with all their people, all their flocks and herds, and piles of wealth donated by the appalled Egyptian population. Scripture indicates that a huge mass of some twenty-five thousand people departed hastily from Egypt that night, along with various non-Israelite hangers-on. God's deliverance of His people was complete.

ONGOING COMMEMORATION OF THE PASSOVER

God told Moses that the Passover was to become an annual celebration for the people of Israel. It was to be commemorated as a week-long festival in which the final meal in Egypt was repeated to remind the people of the miraculous way in which God had delivered them from bondage.

The festival was to occur on the fourteenth day of the month Abib (later called Nisan), the month in the lunar calendar that corresponds to March/April in the solar year. This was to be the first month of the religious calendar for the Israelites (the Jewish New Year, Rosh Hashanah, begins the civil calendar, and occurs in the fall). Since the month Abib began on the first new moon after the vernal equinox, the Passover coincided with the rising of the full moon. Note that our celebration of Easter, which occurs on the first Sunday after the first full moon after the vernal equinox, will thus often, but not always, coincide with the Jewish celebration of Passover.

The Passover was to be a celebration reserved exclusively for the people of God. Only those who were circumcised, and thus had identified themselves with God's people, were permitted to celebrate the deliverance that rightfully belonged to them alone.

Another observance connected with the Exodus that was not seasonal in character was the consecration of the firstborn. Firstborn animals were to be sacrificed (except for donkeys, which were unclean), while firstborn sons were to be redeemed by the sacrifice of a substitute. The symbolism was the same as that discussed above, while at the same time serving as a means of remembering the deliverance of Israel's firstborn while the firstborn of Egypt were being slaughtered.

THE SIGNIFICANCE OF THE PASSOVER

Few Old Testament events point more clearly to the work of Christ than the Passover. Familiar verses like John 1:29 and I Corinthians 5:7 make the connection explicit. What are some of the parallels that make this celebration such a powerful reminder of the saving work of Jesus?

First of all, the Last Supper celebrated by Jesus with His disciples was the Seder, the commemorative Passover meal instituted by Moses at the time of the Exodus. Jesus Himself gave new meaning to the elements of the meal, indicating that the bread would henceforth symbolize His body, broken on the cross, while the cup of wine shared by the participants would stand for His blood, shed for the sins of many. We continue to celebrate that meal and what it stands for whenever we observe the Lord's Supper and remember how our Lord has delivered us from death.

Secondly, Jesus Himself fulfilled the symbolism of the lamb whose blood provided protection from the angel of death. The fact that He was crucified at the time of the Passover underscores this truth. In the same way that the blood on the doorposts of the Israelites purified their homes and made them fit habitations for the Lord, so the blood of Christ makes His people fit for the presence of God.

Thirdly, the fact that the firstborn represents those who follow is expanded upon in passages like Romans 8:29, where Christ, in His work of salvation, is described as "the firstborn among many brothers." He is the firstborn who died so that those who follow might be spared the pains of death.

Thus the events of the Passover picture the glorious work of salvation that God intended from all eternity to accomplish on behalf of His people. In Jesus we see the protecting God who stands at the door to save us from judgment, the Lamb who was sacrificed as a substitute for our sins, and the firstborn who died so that His brothers could live forever in the presence of God.

STUDIES IN EXODUS VI

Crossing the Red Sea - Exodus 13:17-14:31

Again we face a familiar story, and yet one from which Scripture draws significant applications. We should not be surprised that one of the mightiest miracles performed by God in the Old Testament is seen in the New Testament as an exemplar of spiritual truth.

THE ROUTE OF THE EXODUS

The passage before us gives a number of geographical clues indicating the direction in which the Israelites fled as they were leaving Egypt, but while some of the sites are identifiable with some certainty, many are not. In general, though, the indication in 13:17 that God did not lead the Israelites through Philistine territory shows that they did not follow the Great Trunk, the trade route from Egypt to Babylon that ran along the edge of the Mediterranean Sea until just south of the Carmel range in northern Palestine, then cut eastward toward the Fertile Crescent. By cutting southward into the Sinai Peninsula after crossing the sea, the Israelites would have avoided a well-guarded path, along with a powerful enemy.

The places mentioned in connection with the early part of their journey - Succoth, Etham, Migdol (both generic terms meaning “fort”), Pi Hahiroth, and Baal Zephon - are all found in the general region of the modern Suez Canal, between the Gulf of Suez and the Mediterranean Sea. In Moses’ day, this region was a fresh-water marsh containing several large lakes, all of which have been obliterated by the building of the Suez Canal.

Thus the Israelites would have left Goshen, headed east, turned north until they approached the first fort along the Great Trunk, then turned eastward until they reached one of the lakes in the marshland (which one is a matter of conjecture). After crossing the lake, they would have turned southward into the Sinai Peninsula, where they received the law at Mount Sinai, at the southern end of that peninsula.

THE MIRACLE OF THE PARTING OF THE WATERS

It has often been noted that *Sea of Reeds* is the correct translation of the body of water featured in this passage, as opposed to the traditional *Red Sea*. The Red Sea is a large body of water that runs along the western edge of the Arabian Peninsula. At its northern end are two “arms,” the Gulf of Suez on the west and the Gulf of Aqaba on the east. In between these “arms” lies the Sinai Peninsula. While supposing that the Israelites crossed the main body of the Red Sea is clearly impossible - they would have wound up in Arabia rather than Sinai - some have suggested that the Gulf of Suez remains a possibility. While crossing this body of water would have placed the Israelites in the Sinai Peninsula, this identification is unlikely because the northern end of the gulf is too far from the locations indicated in the passage to make it a reasonable choice. That leaves us with one of the fresh-water lakes, any of which could have legitimately been described as a *Sea of Reeds* because of the papyrus growing in the marshland. Lake Balah, Lake Timsah, and the Bitter

Lakes have all been suggested as possibilities, though the first may be the most likely because it is the farthest north of the three.

As one might expect, both liberal and conservative scholars have sought some naturalistic explanation for the miracle of the parting of the waters (after all, the Bible does mention God utilizing a strong east wind for the purpose). Such an approach is impossible for one who takes the text seriously, however. No body of water shallow enough to be dried up by the wind and shifting tides during the night would be deep enough to pile up heaps of water on either side of the Israelites, or to drown an entire Egyptian army on its return to its place. Only by ignoring the details of the text - the fact that the waters subsided in a single night, the fact that the Israelites walked across dry ground rather than mud, the fact that an Egyptian army of significant size was drowned in the waters (six hundred chariots would not have constituted the entire army of Egypt, but would have included the entire royal regiment - *Pharaoh's* chariots and horsemen) - could one attempt a naturalistic explanation of what occurred here. In simple terms, this is a miracle in the purest sense - divine intervention beyond the normal operations of the natural world.

DIVINE GUIDANCE

Throughout the Exodus, God guides His people every step of the way by means of a cloud by day and a pillar of fire by night. Again, naturalistic explanations simply will not do, though scholars have proposed everything from volcanic eruptions to smoking lamps carried by the advance scouts. The cloud and fire that lead and protect the Israelites in the wilderness represent the presence and glory of God, and it is this cloud and fire that indwell the Tabernacle when it is built.

While God may not guide us in such a visible or literal way, He nonetheless does guide His people today. How? He does so through His Word and by means of His Spirit. While it may be simpler to look at a visible object and say, "When it goes, I go, and when it stops, I stop," we have a privilege that the Israelites never enjoyed - the personal presence of God *within* every believer, wherever he or she may be.

HUMAN FRAILTY

The responses of both the Israelites and the Egyptians in this passage demonstrate the hard-heartedness of sinful man. As far as the Egyptians are concerned, it didn't take Pharaoh very long to change his mind about letting the Israelites go. The plagues were quickly forgotten in the frenzied effort to retain control over their slave labor force. But God finally ended Pharaoh's opposition to His work by destroying his capacity to resist. By leading Israel into what appeared to be an inescapable cul-de-sac, God drew Pharaoh's army forward to its destruction. There can be no question that the ultimate end of those who harden their hearts against God is destruction. Amenhotep II never fought a significant battle for the rest of his days.

The Israelites, of course, suffered their own form of amnesia. While Pharaoh tended to forget the judgments of God all too quickly, the Israelites just as quickly forgot God's deliverance. The

sight of the Egyptian army on the horizon engendered panic in the ranks, with poor Moses bearing the brunt of it - not the last time such a reaction would occur among God's people. But God gave them victory without one Israelite having to lift a finger to wage war against their enemies. As too often happens today, the Israelites tended to ask, "What are we going to do?" without ever thinking to ask, "What is God going to do?"

"BAPTIZED INTO MOSES"

We are told in 14:31 that the result of the crossing of the Red Sea was that the people feared God - at least for the moment. But the deliverance that God gave to His people had another consequence as well - "the people put their trust . . . in Moses his servant." I Corinthians 10:2 says that the Israelites "were all baptized into Moses in the cloud and in the sea." What could this mean? Certainly, those who are baptized in the name of Christ are baptized into His death and resurrection - in other words, baptism involves identification with the Son of God. This "baptism" thus involved identification with Moses, the leader God had appointed to bring the Israelites out of bondage in Egypt and to the borders of the Promised Land. Moses was not God; he was "faithful as a servant in all God's house" (Hebrews 3:5) - the same house over which Christ, the Son of God, is the Head. Similarly, those who lead God's people today are servants in God's house. Yet if they are to lead effectively, God's people must identify with them and trust them to carry out their God-appointed tasks faithfully. I am not suggesting that spiritual leaders are beyond question or criticism - far from it. We must recognize, however, that those who have been appointed by God to places of leadership cannot fulfill their God-appointed tasks without the trust of the people. If that trust is missing, the result will be frustration for both people and leader, along with an atmosphere that will seriously hinder the work of the Gospel.

STUDIES IN EXODUS VII

Bread and Water - Exodus 15:22-16:36

Last week we saw how God completed the deliverance of His people from Egypt through the waters of the Red Sea and drowned the Egyptian army in those same waters. As the people move toward their designated place of worship at Mount Sinai, we find that they begin to question the ability of God to provide for those He has delivered. The incidents before us today should leave no doubt that He who saves is also able to keep.

THE TRAVELS OF THE ISRAELITES

After crossing the Red Sea (see last week's lesson for probable identifications), the Israelites headed south into the Sinai peninsula. Shur refers to a line of Egyptian forts that protected the northern access to the region. The identities of Marah and Elim are interrelated. If the crossing of the sea occurred at one of the northern lakes, Marah is probably the southernmost of the lakes found north of the Gulf of Suez, usually referred to as the Bitter Lakes because of their high saline content. Elim would then be an oasis about ten miles south of the Bitter Lakes, just below the northern tip of the gulf.

If the Bitter Lakes themselves were the site of the crossing (not as likely, since the name "Sea of Reeds" implies a fresh-water location), Marah would be modern Ain Harawah, located fifty miles south of the northern tip of the Gulf of Suez, and Elim would be Gharandel, the largest oasis in the Sinai. In any case, the Desert of Sin is the barren region in the southwest corner of the Sinai peninsula.

THE WATERS OF MARAH

Three days after crossing the Red Sea, the Israelites had yet to find a source of fresh water. Thirst can be a powerful need, and the people were getting to the point where the lack of water was becoming an obsession. Finally, they saw water far ahead near the horizon. They must have been overjoyed. One can readily imagine the first people who saw the water, sprinting ahead with whatever energy they had left in their bodies, then throwing themselves headlong into the refreshing moisture. Except they soon discovered that it was anything but refreshing. Instead of quenching their thirst, the salty waters intensified their longing for refreshment.

As was quickly becoming the pattern, Moses was made the target for their ire. Moses prayed to the Lord, and God showed him a piece of wood which, when cast into the salty waters of Marah, absorbed the salt and made the waters drinkable. Though many legends of bushes with this property have surfaced over the years, there has never been any concrete verification of these stories. Again, we are faced with a miracle that science has not been able to explain.

Several points should be noted about this little narrative. The first is that God specifically designed this incident as a test for His people (15:25). The obvious point of the test was to inculcate

faith. When God brings trials into our lives, the purposes of those trials are fulfilled only as we respond obediently to the God who brought them. Instead, the Israelites complained. Not only that, but they failed to learn the lesson of Marah, since they continued to complain at every bump in their long road to the Promised Land. In short, the complainer negates in his own life the purpose for which God brings suffering, and in the process only guarantees himself a longer experience of suffering (15:26). God *will* do the work of sanctification in His people, and the more we harden our hearts, the longer it will take for His purposes to be achieved in us.

God is also a merciful God, however. Not only did He provide pure water for His people despite their complaining, but He then led them to a beautiful oasis beside which they could camp and find rest. Life will always have its share of suffering, and this is essential for our growth. But God also recognizes our need for times of rest and refreshment, and He graciously provides those as periods of respite from the trials that surround us.

MANNA IN THE DESERT

The incident in chapter 16 occurred a month exactly after the events of the Exodus. After leaving Egypt, crossing the Red Sea, going three days without water, and resting at the oasis of Elim, the Israelites moved southward into the wilderness at the southern end of the Sinai peninsula. It didn't take long for the people to begin to romanticize their experience in Egypt, contrasting their empty bellies with the "meat by the bucketful" they somehow remembered from their recent slavery. And worse yet, instead of longing to return to slavery as they had when trapped by the Red Sea, they now wished they had been killed by the plagues that had destroyed the Egyptians (note that there is real irony to be found in comparing 15:26 and 16:2).

Though Moses is again the target of the people's complaints, God knows that they are really complaining against Him (16:7). Yet He promises to provide for their needs in a totally unexpected way. The "manna" He sent (the Israelites didn't know what it was; the name is an indication of their puzzlement) would sustain them for their entire stay in the wilderness, up until the day they entered the Promised Land.

Several points should be made in connection with the provision of manna. First of all, naturalistic explanations again will not suffice. Though the description of the manna as coming with the morning dew and "melting away" as the sun rose suggests a natural phenomenon, no candidate really fits the description given here. Scholars have theorized that the manna may have been anything from the secretions of aphids who fed on tamarisk trees to the sap of a desert plant indigenous to the Sinai. These are impossible, however, because of three factors - the fact that the manna appeared for six days but not on the seventh and decayed within twenty-four hours *except* on the seventh day, the fact that these natural phenomena produce nothing near the volume required to sustain tens of thousands of people for one day, let alone for forty years, and the fact that these phenomena are only found in certain relatively small regions of the Sinai. The point was to let the people know that it was the Lord who delivered them and was caring for them (16:8), not that desert insects were suddenly working overtime but taking a Saturday break from their secretions.

Secondly, the manna was provided by God in such a way as to provide another test for the people (16:4). The test was one of simple obedience. They were to gather only as much as they needed for one day at a time; they were not to save any of it overnight; they were to gather twice as much on the sixth day, save it overnight, then not gather any on the seventh day. Like the instructions given to Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden, these rules were simple, yet adherence to them demonstrated the extent to which the people trusted God. Our response to God's commands speaks volumes about our relationship with God. We certainly may not conclude that "rules don't matter, but our relationship with God does." The two are not contrary ideas.

Thirdly, this passage provides the first mention of the word *Sabbath* in connection with the seventh day (16:23). The principle had been enunciated in the Creation account (Genesis 2:3), where *shabbat* is used as a verb, but here the noun form of the word that was to describe the principle appears for the first time. Here, as in Genesis 2, the emphasis is on rest rather than on worship. The day is to be holy in the sense that it is different from other days. Worship is later incorporated into the meaning of the day (Leviticus 23:3), but has not yet become an element of Israelite observance at this time. The Sabbath is also described as a gift from God (16:29), but, as is the case today, some continue to look upon it as an unwarranted restriction.

Fourthly, the manna was intended by God to teach a perpetual lesson to the people. Verses 31-36 are obviously a commentary on the narrative that Moses wrote while reflecting back on this early period in the wilderness wanderings (the Ark of the Covenant had not yet been built, nor did Israel at this time know they were going to be in the wilderness for forty years). But God wanted His people to be able to remember the way He provided for them in the desert. It is only by *remembering* the times of God's special providence that our faith is built up through such experiences.

Fifthly, the manna in the wilderness was intended to point to Christ. In John 6:30-40, Jesus compares Himself with the manna God gave through Moses, and notes that He is the bread that gives life, not just for each day, but for all eternity. It is only by partaking of Him that one may know true abundant life.

STUDIES IN EXODUS VIII

The Rock and the Banner - Exodus 17

As the journey toward Sinai continues, the Israelites meet further obstacles - another water shortage and, for the first time, a military engagement. These crises will reveal much about the character of the people and the character of God, while at the same time providing useful lessons for us.

THE JOURNEY OF THE ISRAELITES

Again, we'll take a few minutes to trace the stage of the Israelites' journey that is found in today's passage. When we left them last week, they were in the southern end of the Sinai peninsula near the sea. Today, they head inland toward Mount Sinai (or Mount Horeb), following the path of one of the wadis that crisscross the wilderness. As they near Sinai, the wadi in which they are traveling intersects another one which, like the one they have been following, is dry (there is such an intersection a few miles away from the mountain range that is most commonly identified with Mount Sinai). This intersection is believed by many to be the location of Rephidim. The two incidents described in chapter 17 would thus have taken place at the foot of the mountain range that served as the initial destination of the Israelites.

ANOTHER WATER SHORTAGE (Exodus 17:1-7)

As had occurred at Marah, a shortage of water brought from the Israelites a wail of complaint against Moses that was really a complaint against the Lord. Moses responds by accusing the people of "putting God to the test." What does this mean? Most of the uses of this phrase in Scripture refer back to this incident or to others like it in the wilderness wanderings. Other occurrences include the incident of Gideon's fleece (Judges 6:36-40), the confrontation of Isaiah and Ahaz (Isaiah 7:12), and the temptation of Christ in the wilderness (Matthew 4:7, in which Jesus quotes from Deuteronomy 6:16 - a reference to the incident at Rephidim). What do these passages have in common? All involve the refusal of someone to trust God to do what He had promised to do. In Gideon's case, God had promised to deliver Israel from the Midianites through him, but he sought tangible confirmation through the setting out of the fleece. In the case of Ahaz, the wicked king hypocritically refused to put God to the test, when in reality what he was refusing to do was to obey a direct command of God given through Isaiah the prophet. Again, Ahaz exemplifies a failure to trust God. With Jesus, of course, Satan was trying to get Him to take matters into His own hands in the way His earthly ministry was to proceed. Jesus refused to do so, recognizing that such a decision would show lack of faith in God, as the Israelites had done in the wilderness.

Moses, rather than rebuking the people, turns to the Lord with his complaint. Anyone in a position of leadership will face problems, usually on a regular basis, from those he is trying to lead. The Lord is the source of help in such situations - confrontation, as Moses found later to his chagrin, accomplishes little of a positive nature.

God then directs Moses and the people to a rock at the edge of the Sinai mountain range. He tells Moses to strike the rock with his staff, and water then flows out sufficient for the needs of the people. Again, scholars have sought naturalistic explanations for this incident. The most common of these is the fact that sedimentary rock contains air pockets that fill with water. If one of these pockets is located near the face of a cliff, striking the rock could cave in the side of the pocket and allow the water to flow out of the rock. While this is certainly an identifiable natural phenomenon, the quantity of water involved could never be sufficient to quench the thirst of twenty-five thousand Israelites. We are again in the undisputed realm of the miraculous.

This incident becomes the basis for a spiritual lesson taught by Paul in I Corinthians 10:4. In this passage, Paul warns the Corinthians against losing faith and giving up as the Israelites had done. He also compares the rock from which the water was produced to Christ (note that, in Exodus 17:6, God says that He will stand before the rock as Moses strikes it). What is the point of the comparison? Jesus certainly pictured Himself as the giver of Living Water (John 4:10-14; 7:37-39), in the first case referring to the salvation He came to accomplish and in the second speaking of the Holy Spirit. As the water was vital to the survival of the Israelites in the wilderness, so Christ is the giver and sustainer of life for His people. Some have seen in the striking of the rock an allusion to the death of Christ, and have noted that, when Moses struck the rock to provide water at a later date (Numbers 20:1-13), he was punished because Christ, the Rock, only needed to be smitten once; Moses thus spoiled the imagery intended to point to the work of the coming Messiah. Whether that be the case or not, the main exhortation Paul has in mind is that we should not allow our faith to falter in times of crisis, but rather turn to the only source of sustenance, our Lord Jesus Christ.

THE ATTACK OF THE AMALEKITES (Exodus 17:8-16)

The second incident referred to in Exodus 17 is the Amalekite attack on the Israelites. The Amalekites were descendants of Amalek, one of the grandsons of Esau (Genesis 36:15), and thus were distant relatives of the Israelites. They were a nomadic tribe that wandered in the regions of the Negev and Sinai at this time. Their attack on the Israelites was a particularly cowardly one, in which they came up behind the line of march and began to pick off the stragglers (Deuteronomy 25:17-18). For this offense, God decreed their extermination; Saul's failure to carry out this order cost him his throne (I Samuel 15).

Though Israel certainly would have outnumbered the Amalekite raiders, they had never fought a battle before. After more than four centuries in slavery in Egypt, there was not a seasoned warrior in the bunch. Joshua is given the responsibility of leading the Israelites into battle, while Moses stands atop a nearby rock and holds his hands in the air. The obvious significance of the upraised hands is that the outcome of the battle depended upon the Lord, and as long as Moses was interceding with Yahweh for the army of Israel, Joshua and his men were victorious. When prayer stopped, victory stopped.

The application to us should be obvious. Victory over spiritual enemies can only come through the power of God, and that power may be obtained only through prayer. We cannot expect

to know God's power unless our hands are raised to Him in supplication. As soon as we lower our hands and undertake the battle on our own, disaster is assured. We cannot win the battles we face in our own strength, but God has promised victory if we trust in Him.

After the battle is won, Moses erects an altar and names it Jehovah Nissi ("The Lord Our Banner"). When the Israelites were in Egypt, they saw the legions of the Pharaoh go out to war, each under the flag of its patron deity - the Amun Division, the Seth Division, etc. God was here making it clear that He was the protector of Israel, and that He would fight their battles for them if they put their trust in Him. The same God is the Lord over His Church today and has given to us the same promise. The same Rock that sustains the Church will give it the final victory (Matthew 16:18).

STUDIES IN EXODUS IX

The Giving of the Law - Exodus 19-20

Today we arrive at the event that defined the original purpose of the exodus. The Lord had told Moses during the encounter at the burning bush that Israel would return to Mount Sinai and worship Him there. God had demanded that Pharaoh let the Israelites go so that they could worship Him in the desert. Now, after three months of traveling, the people had arrived at the holy mountain (most scholars identify it with Jebel Musa in the central part of the southern Sinai peninsula) where God would confirm His covenant with them and give them His law.

THE HOLINESS OF GOD

The giving of the Law at Mount Sinai put on display the holiness of God in a way that the Israelites had not heretofore experienced. They had seen the pillars of cloud and fire, but had not yet been exposed to the awesomeness of the holiness and majesty of their God. Even in the terrifying demonstrations of power given at Mount Sinai, God was shielding the people. These were but small reminders of a power beyond comprehension. The displays of power at the mountain had several purposes.

First of all, according to Exodus 19:9, the visible manifestations at the mount were intended to verify the authority of Moses. When the people saw Moses approach the presence of God and return unharmed, and when they heard the voice of God speaking directly to Moses, they should have recognized that he was God's chosen man to lead them to their promised inheritance.

Secondly, the demonstrations of power - thunder and lightning, fire, smoke, and earthquake - were intended to intimidate the people. Unlike the Wizard of Oz, who accomplished by intimidation what he had no power to enforce, God had a good reason for inducing fear in the people - it was an entirely appropriate emotion for those approaching the presence of the Almighty God, and Israel had shown all too little of the right kind of fear in the previous three months. They had been afraid of drought and starvation, they had been afraid of opposing armies, but they had shown pitifully little fear of the God who had delivered them. They needed to understand, not only that God was one who could and should inspire terror, but also that one who feared God need fear nothing else.

Thirdly, the manifestations of power were designed to hide the Lord as much as they were designed to reveal Him. After all, no one could look upon God and live. If what the Israelites saw was terrifying, how much more terrifying would it have been had they looked upon the glory of the Lord Himself?

PREPARING THE PEOPLE

In Exodus 19:5-6, God indicates that Israel is to be His "treasured possession," a "kingdom of priests," and a "holy nation" (cf. Peter's application of these phrases to the Church in I Peter 2:9). They are to belong to God in a special way, but not for their own sake. As priests, they are to

mediate between the Lord and the nations, so that through them His Word and His Messiah can go forth and bless the entire human race. In verse 8, they glibly agree to adhere to the Lord's commands, but they still need to be prepared for what will follow.

The preparations God ordered were both positive and negative (Exodus 19:10-15). Positively, they were to wash themselves and their clothing and engage in no activity that would render them ceremonially unclean. Negatively, they were not to touch the holy mountain. If either man or beast touched the mountain while the presence of God was upon it, he was to be stoned by the community. Even after God appeared on the mountain, He warned them not to let their curiosity get the better of them (19:21-22), lest He "break out" against them (cf. II Samuel 5:20; 6:8).

THE DECALOGUE

The Ten Commandments are certainly the most familiar part of the law given by God through Moses. They may be viewed in several ways. First of all, they may be viewed as a summary of the moral law. The distinction among moral, civil, and ceremonial laws first appears in the *Summa Theologica* of Thomas Aquinas in the thirteenth century. The distinction is not strictly biblical, but is nonetheless useful in dealing with the aspects of the Old Testament law. The moral law is an expression of the character of God, and is thus applicable to all people in all times and all places. We see these commandments serving as the basis for God's requirements of man both before the time of Moses and after the coming of Christ. Those who object to the ongoing applicability of the Decalogue usually do so because of a desire to propound antinomianism, a dispensational bifurcation of Scripture, or a denial of the need for continuing Sabbath observance.

It should also be noted that the Decalogue is not the *only* summary of the moral law found in Scripture. The two great commandments cited by Jesus in Matthew 22:37-39 correspond to the two tables of the law, while the Golden Rule (Matthew 7:12) may be seen as the briefest such summary in the Bible.

Secondly, the Decalogue may be viewed as containing the stipulations of the covenant God is here establishing with Israel. It was common for such treaties in the Ancient Near East to begin by identifying the parties involved in the treaty (20:2), describing the parameters for the relationship between the two parties, listing stipulations that would constitute keeping or violating the covenant, and specifying the consequences of covenant-keeping and covenant-breaking.

It should be noted that these two ways of thinking about the Decalogue are not mutually exclusive, but complementary. If Israel was to be God's "treasured possession," the nature of that special relationship needed to be defined. But if Israel was also to be a "kingdom of priests" who mediated God's truth to the nations, what God revealed to them must have universal applicability and communicate something about God's character as well as His will.

THE RESPONSE OF THE PEOPLE

In Exodus 20:18-21, we see the people's response to God's display of His power. They were understandably terrified, but again their fear was misguided. Their response was one of avoidance - they had no desire to approach the presence of God. But God's intention was for the manifestation of His presence to generate both fear *and* comfort. Their terror should have discouraged them from sin (20:20), but they also needed to see in God's presence a source of help and protection. If such a great God was *their* God, what had they to fear, either from the elements or from their enemies? Unfortunately, Israel tended to forget their terror and fall quickly into sin, while forgetting the comfort of God's might and fearing every potential source of opposition that appeared before them during their journeys.

THE BUILDING OF ALTARS

The last section of chapter 20 deals with how God is to be worshiped by the Israelites. Verse 23 forbids idolatry, as had the First and Second Commandments. It was common practice among the pagan nations to worship a pantheon of gods, with one god recognized as head of the pantheon and many other gods and goddesses subordinate to him. The Lord was not to be worshiped in this way.

Secondly, in verses 24-25, God indicates to the Israelites that they are not to worship Him with the works of their own hands. Altars are to be made of earth or unhewn stone, not of cut stone. If it was wrong for Cain to offer to God as a sacrifice for sin the product of his labor, so it was wrong for Israel.

The third stipulation (verse 26) prohibits the pagan practice of priestly nudity. Both the holiness of God and the dignity of the priesthood require modesty.

STUDIES IN EXODUS X

The Book of the Covenant - Exodus 21:1-23:19

Unlike the general moral principles found in the Decalogue, which are unique among ancient law codes, we find in the Book of the Covenant casuistic or case laws common to the genre among the nations of the Ancient Near East. The laws given here by God are in many ways similar to those of other contemporary codes such as that of Hammurabi, but differ both in the motives behind the laws - the Israelites' unique relationship to God and His deliverance of the people from Egypt - and in the humane treatment prescribed therein (the punishments to be imposed may seem harsh by modern standards, but are much less so than those of other codes, and are class-neutral; other law codes routinely prescribe different levels of punishment depending on whether the offender is a nobleman, a free citizen, or a slave).

THE NATURE AND PLACE OF THE CIVIL LAW

Last week we looked at the moral law given by God to Israel and noted that this was an expression of His character, and thus was binding on all people at all times and in all places. The civil law, on the other hand, was designed to provide a series of statutes to regulate life during the wilderness wanderings and in the Promised Land after it was conquered and settled. It is thus more limited in its applicability, for a number of reasons. First of all, it was designed for an agrarian society built around life in the village and field. Its provisions do not address the concerns of city life, let alone the issues raised by life in the modern world. The specific provisions of the civil law thus are not directly relevant to life in different temporal and cultural contexts.

Secondly, the civil law is addressed to life under a theocracy. God was the acknowledged ruler of His people, and thus it could be assumed that all within the society could legitimately be held accountable for the right worship of God and the honoring of His name. Despite repeated efforts to duplicate the theocratic setting, from Geneva to Massachusetts Bay, it cannot be done. Israel was a people defined in physical terms, identified by the sign of circumcision. The Church is a spiritual people, and can never be the kind of closed community with its own laws and government that Israel was.

What benefit, then, can we expect to gain from studying the civil law of Israel? First of all, these case laws do provide examples of specific, practical applications of the principles found in the Ten Commandments. Studying these examples may help us to see more clearly how the principles of the Decalogue ought to be applied to our own social circumstances.

Also, these casuistic laws give us insight into the heart of God. In them, we see the things that God considered necessary and important for a just society. Things like the preservation of the family, the cycles of work and rest, the sanctity of life, and the importance of respect for personal property all have application in every society and can serve as the basis for determining the justice of laws that are being proposed in our own legislatures today.

THE *LEX TALIONIS*

In Exodus 21:23-25, we have one of many biblical statements of what has come to be called the *lex talionis*, or “law of the tooth.” The basic principle stated in passages such as this is the idea that the punishment should fit the crime. While the way in which it is stated conjures up images of people having their eyes poked out by sadistic magistrates, the law in reality served as a limitation on the extent of the punishment that could be exacted for the commission of a crime against society. The *lex talionis*, for instance, would not have allowed Jean Valjean to be imprisoned for years and hounded by the police for decades for stealing a loaf of bread, as occurred in Victor Hugo’s *Les Miserables*. This principle also undermines much of modern jurisprudence, however, when today’s legal thinkers argue that the concept of punishment is in itself barbaric and immoral.

We now move on to consider some of the specific laws found in the Book of the Covenant, though we will only be able to look at a sampling of them.

SLAVERY (21:1-11)

Slavery, abhorrent as it may be to us, was commonplace in the ancient world. Slaves were most frequently obtained as a result of military conquest, and such slaves were generally held in perpetual servitude unless freed by their captors or given the opportunity to purchase their freedom. This passage, however, deals with voluntary servitude as a means of relieving the burden of debt. In an agrarian society, two straight years of crop failure could put a farmer in a financial hole from which there was little hope of recovery. The solution was indentured servitude. A man could sell himself or members of his family into bondage; then, after six years of labor, he would be released, debt-free. Because he had no land to which to return, such slaves might voluntarily choose perpetual servitude, and the law allows for this possibility, but no Israelite could be kept in perpetual bondage against his will.

With women, the situation was different, because it was assumed that a daughter sold into slavery would become the wife of the man to whom she was sold. Thus there was no provision for release unless she was mistreated, but she was assured full legal rights in the household. This was often a good way for fathers who could not afford a dowry to find husbands for their daughters.

PERSONAL INJURY (21:12-36)

The main principles enunciated in the case law regarding personal injury are that those who undermine the fabric of society are subject to execution, that intent should be a factor in judging occurrences of injury, and that carelessness is to be discouraged. The first principle is seen in the requirement of capital punishment for affronts against God, human life, or the family. All are sacred, and thus blasphemy, murder, kidnaping, sexual perversions, and contempt for parents are all capital crimes. Verse 13 well illustrates the application of the issues of intent and the discouraging of carelessness, in that one who takes the life of another accidentally is not executed, but must still suffer a severe penalty.

We cannot leave this passage without taking note of the provisions concerning the loss of a fetus in verses 22-25. Unlike the NASB, which in its initial printing treated this incident as describing a miscarriage, the NIV is clearly correct in describing it as a premature birth (the Hebrew word here is the verb for “depart,” and is never used to refer to death, in addition to the fact that the NASB repeatedly had to insert the word *further* into the text to make sense out of their translation). The implications of the two translations have serious import for the modern controversy over abortion. If the original NASB was right, the death of the fetus involves the payment of a fine, while any injury to the mother invoked the *lex talionis*. On the other hand, if the NIV is right, the *lex talionis* applies to any injury sustained by either the mother or her baby. Thus it would indicate that one who kills a baby in the womb, even if only through striking an innocent bystander during a fight, is subject to capital punishment. How much more is that the case if one kills such a child intentionally? [NOTE: Later editions of the NASB fixed this problem.]

PROPERTY LAW (22:1-15)

Even today, the Middle East is notorious as a haven for thieves and pickpockets of every description. This is nothing new. The Book of the Covenant is not unique in devoting considerable space to the problems associated with loss of property through theft or the carelessness of others; we find similar provisions in the other law codes of the era. The application of the *lex talionis* here involves repayment in kind (usually with a fine tacked on at least equivalent to the value of the stolen property), and also includes protection for the thief against assaults upon his life (22:2-3). Notice also the general assumption that testimony given under oath is trustworthy (22:11); this does not imply that all men are truthful, but does assume that one who swears an oath before God is opening himself up to God’s judgment should he violate that oath. People today, of course, have no such beliefs, and thus suffer no such restraints on their consciences or behavior.

SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY (22:16-23:9)

Again we find capital punishment required for those who would undermine the fabric of society, particularly in the areas of false worship and sexual perversion. This section of the law also emphasizes the fact that members of a society are responsible to care for one another - “I am my brother’s keeper.” This is reflected in the requirement to care for widows and orphans - the truly helpless members of society, and to respect the alien in their midst - a warning that is always associated with a reminder of their years of servitude in Egypt. The basic principle of mutual responsibility is also seen in the banning of lending money at interest and the requirement that judges and witnesses be impartial and honest. It is worth noticing that most of these laws are phrased as general principles rather than as case law. It is certainly helpful to consider the application of these principles to our own society, where individualism is so strong and the sense of responsibility for others so weak.

REGULAR RELIGIOUS OBSERVANCES (23:10-19)

The religious observances mentioned in this final section of the Book of the Covenant are designed to fit the various cycles of an agrarian society. Men are to rest weekly, the land is to rest every seven years, and God is to be acknowledged by the people as the provider of their daily bread through three annual observances that coincide with the three major harvest seasons. These feasts were later known as the Feast of Unleavened Bread (Passover), the Feast of Weeks (Pentecost), and the Feast of Ingathering (Tabernacles or Booths). We thus find the basic principles of work and rest, stewardship of the land, and gratitude to God as the sustainer of life being acted out in the cycles of Israelite society.

STUDIES IN EXODUS XI

Tabernacle and Priesthood - Exodus 25-30

Today we undertake our third and last study associated with the giving of the Law at Mount Sinai. If the Decalogue summarizes the moral law and the Book of the Covenant provides a good sampling of the civil law, the instructions for building the Tabernacle and establishing the priesthood provide a substantial glimpse of the ceremonial law that is elaborated upon in much greater detail in the book of Leviticus.

THE NATURE AND PLACE OF THE CEREMONIAL LAW

The third major division of the law given to Israel at Mount Sinai is the ceremonial law - the legislation relating to the way in which the nation of Israel was to worship God. The stipulations of the ceremonial law included instructions for building and maintaining the place of worship, for consecrating the priesthood, for offering sacrifices, and for a variety of special observances, from the weekly Sabbath to annual feasts to longer cycles such as the Sabbatical Year and the Year of Jubilee.

The worship of Israel was clearly governed by the Regulative Principle (Deuteronomy 12:32). There were three reasons for this. The first was that deviation from God-given instructions for worship would involve offering to God the works of man's hands, which had already been clearly forbidden (Exodus 20:25). Secondly, the form taken by the deviation would likely not be original, but instead would probably be taken from the forms of worship practiced by the surrounding idolaters (Deuteronomy 12:29-31), which was clearly an affront to the true and living God. Thirdly, the ceremonial law was carefully structured to portray in symbolic form the person and work of the coming Messiah, and any deviation in the slightest particular would run the risk of destroying the instructional value of the entire form of worship.

It is this third factor that indicates the place of the ceremonial law in the life of Israel. The ceremonial law gave the people direction for how they were to approach their God, giving Him praise for His blessings to them and offering atonement for their sins against Him. At the same time, the ceremonies served as a teaching tool - the people learned that God was too holy for men to approach without the shedding of blood, and that animal sacrifices could never be sufficient to deal in any final way with the problem of sin. It thus served as a preparation for the Gospel and the coming of Christ. The good news that the Son of God brought to the people of Israel is that they would now be able to enter the presence of God unafraid, without the mediatorial work of a human priest, and without the shedding of animal blood (or their own). Instead, the sacrifice had been made once for all time when Christ died on the cross, and the veil that separated the people from God had been torn away by God Himself. One could now enter the presence of God without a human mediator because the divine Mediator, Jesus Christ Himself, sat on the right hand of God the Father interceding for His people. Thus the ceremonial law had both positive and negative purposes, showing in symbolic form what Christ was to accomplish, while at the same time demonstrating how far short the symbol fell of the reality that God was to accomplish through His Son.

Because the ceremonial law was a symbol pointing to a greater reality, and because that symbol fell far short of the actual reality, it was inevitable that the ceremonial law would pass away when that toward which it pointed arrived. The book of Hebrews provides the great New Testament discourse on the obsolescence of the ceremonial law. Tabernacle, priests, and sacrifices are no longer needed when the Son of God has done His atoning work.

OFFERINGS FOR THE TABERNACLE (25:1-9)

The Tabernacle was to be constructed entirely from contributions made by the people. The materials involved in the building and maintenance of the place of worship were the most costly objects the people possessed - gold, silver, and bronze were the most precious metals, while blue, purple, and scarlet yarn would have been costly because of the scarcity of the dyes needed to produce those colors. Ram skins and dugong (sea cow) hides would have been easier to come by, and involved the bounty of the land and the sea, though, again, dyeing them would have been expensive. Acacia wood was fairly common in the Sinai peninsula, but was uniquely suitable to the task because of its hardness. The spices and gemstones were all imported from great distances, and thus would have been costly as well.

It is worth noting that much of these materials - certainly the precious metals, fine textiles, and gemstones - had been obtained from the Egyptians on the night of the exodus. While this does not make them any less free-will offerings of love from the people, it also demonstrates how God is able to glorify Himself at the expense of the unbelieving world. The people gave God their best, but they had obtained it through the plundering of the Egyptians, accomplished by God Himself.

THE STRUCTURE AND CONTENTS OF THE TABERNACLE (25:10-27:21; 30:1-38)

Most Christians, at some time in their lives, have seen diagrams or models of the Tabernacle built by the Israelites in the wilderness, or of Solomon's Temple, which was a larger and more permanent version of the same basic idea. The outer enclosure measured fifty cubits (a cubit was about a foot and a half) by one hundred cubits, and consisted of animal skins hung from five-cubit poles spaced around the perimeter. Inside the enclosure was a large bronze altar of sacrifice and a bronze washbasin for the use of the priests. Beyond the basin was an inner tent, thirty cubits by ten cubits. It was covered by four kinds of pelts and was divided inside into two compartments, the Holy Place (twenty cubits by ten cubits) and the inner sanctuary, the cubical Holy of Holies. The Holy Place contained three pieces of furniture - a golden lampstand called the Menorah, which was the only source of light in the sanctuary; a table overlaid with gold to hold the Bread of the Presence; and a golden altar of incense, which stood immediately in front of the curtain that separated the Holy of Holies from the Holy Place. Inside the Holy of Holies was the Ark of the Covenant, a gold-covered box on which rested a lid that served as the base for the Mercy Seat - the invisible throne of God, which rested above the cherubim that made up part of the ark's cover. The Ark of the Covenant initially contained the stone tables on which the law had been written by the finger of God, and later contained also a pot of manna and the rod of Aaron.

The entire structure demonstrated the holiness of God, keeping the people away from His presence. Only priests could enter the court of the Tabernacle; only designated priests could enter the Holy Place at the times of their appointed ministries; only the high priest could enter the Holy of Holies, and that only once a year, on the Day of Atonement, and only then with the most careful of preparations. The perpetual stench of animal sacrifices also served to remind the people that God was a holy God in whose presence sinners could not stand. Any sinner who dared to enter the presence of God must die, and the blood of animals offered on the altar was a continual reminder that the wages of sin was death.

The Tabernacle and the worship that took place in it also pointed to Christ. While the symbolism of the Tabernacle has frequently been abused by imaginative commentators over the years, we must continue to affirm the connection between the symbols of Israelite worship and the atoning work of Christ.

- The bronze altar of sacrifice obviously speaks of the blood shed by Jesus on the cross to atone for the sins of His people. Without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness of sin.
- The bronze basin speaks of cleansing from sin. In the same way that the priests had to be completely bathed in preparation for their ordination, then had only to wash their hands and feet daily in the performance of their duties, so Jesus told Peter that complete cleansing is only required once, but that regular confession of sin keeps one in a right relationship with God (John 13:10).
- The Menorah pictures Christ as the light of the world. He is the only source of light, as He Himself frequently asserted.
- The Table of the Bread of the Presence pictures Christ as the Bread of Life. He sustains His people as they feed on Him (John 6:53-58).
- The Altar of Incense, with its fragrant smoke ascending into the nostrils of God, speaks of the prayer that ascends to heaven as a fragrant offering of love and worship.
- The Ark of the Covenant was, of course, the throne of God Himself, representing His presence among His people. It was common in the Ancient Near East to place covenantal documents under the feet of a deity, both calling him to witness the covenant and seeking his protection in the maintenance of the covenant. The actual throne was invisible, befitting the invisible God, who is described as sitting “enthroned between the cherubim” (Psalm 80:1; 99:1). Since the tearing of the curtain, God’s throne is in the heavens, to which all His people have free access because of the intercessory work of God’s Son, who sits at His right hand.

THE PRIESTHOOD (28:1-29:46)

The garments and ordination ceremonies associated with the priesthood picture two fundamental ideas - holiness and mediatorial ministry. The holiness of the priesthood incorporates two related concepts - the fact that the priests are to be set apart and the fact that they are to be pure. The very nature of the garments sets the priests apart from the rest of the people. They dress differently than others; we find later that they also are to be set apart by the fact that they own no land and do no secular work. They are to be completely absorbed in the service of God and completely dependent upon Him for their material needs.

The priests are also mediators between God and man. They offer sacrifices for the people, and as such the breastplate of the high priest contains stones representing the twelve tribes of Israel. When the high priest enters the presence of God, he does so as the representative of the entire nation. They also mediate between God and man through their role of discerning the will of God. The Urim and Thummim, probably two stones, one black and one white, were used for divining the will of God (presumably by asking yes or no questions, then reaching into the pouch formed by the breastplate and withdrawing one of the stones; similar practices among the Egyptians required three consecutive yes or no answers in order to obtain a definitive oracle).

Christ, of course, fulfilled the symbolism of the priesthood as well, in the process exceeding it as a priest after the order of Melchizedek. He was holy, sinless, undefiled, and like the priests owned nothing and devoted Himself wholly to the work of God. He also is the Mediator between God and His people, the God-man who sacrificed Himself for the sins of those whose names were written down before the foundation of the world. His death atoned for their sins and His righteousness was imputed to them. He also mediated the Word of God to the world, both by speaking it and by embodying it.

STUDIES IN EXODUS XII

The Golden Calf - Exodus 32

Moses and Joshua had been up on the top of Mount Sinai for over a month (Exodus 24:12-18), and the people were getting restless. In their fearful state, it did not take them long to violate the covenant they had just received from the Lord.

MAKING THE CALF (32:1-6)

Several questions need to be addressed in connection with the fabrication of the Golden Calf. The first is, “What motivated the people to ask Aaron to make the calf?” Verse one tells us that, in their uncertainty about Moses’ fate, the people requested “a god who will go before us.” A holy God cannot be approached directly - a lesson the people had learned in a very vivid way with the spectacular manifestations associated with the giving of the Law. Moses had been their mediator, and now that he was (presumably) dead, another mediator was needed. The culture in which they had been raised had taught them that an image could fulfill the required function.

The second question is, “Where did the necessary gold come from?” We should note that the collection for the Tabernacle described in chapter 24 had not yet occurred (chapters 24-31 tell us what God told Moses on the mountain, and Moses had not yet returned from the mountain to communicate these things to the people). The Golden Calf was thus made from gold taken from the Egyptians, though it by no means exhausted the wealth the people had carried away during the exodus.

Thirdly, we must ask, “Why a calf, and what did it represent?” The bull calf was a common symbol of virility and strength in the Ancient Near East. The Israelites are again returning to their cultural roots acquired during the years of slavery in Egypt. Often, pagan gods were pictured as riding upon such calves (e.g., Baal among the Canaanites), though this does not appear to have been the purpose here (i.e., it was not a throne for the invisible God, as the Ark of the Covenant was intended to be). Instead, the Golden Calf was intended to be a representation of Yahweh Himself (verse 4). The incident here described is thus a violation of the Second Commandment rather than the First, though the manner of celebration appears to have borrowed largely from the paganism of Israel’s neighbors.

GOD’S ANGER AND MOSES’ INTERCESSION (32:7-14)

Though the details of the ceremonial law had not yet been revealed to the people, the moral law had, and God was angry at the swiftness with which it had been violated. He threatened to destroy them and start over with Moses as the progenitor of a new covenant people.

Moses’ intercession on behalf of the people has much in common with Abraham’s intercession for Sodom, but is also different in some ways. While Abraham pleads with God not to destroy the righteous with the wicked, Moses makes no effort to argue for the innocence of the

Israelites. Instead, he addresses his pleas solely to the question of the glory and reputation of God Himself. He first argues that the destruction of the Israelites would blacken God's name among the pagan nations, since they would see Him as no better than their own gods, who, when piqued at some insignificant slight from their worshippers, would destroy them in a fit of anger (verse 12). Then he argues for the unconditional nature of the covenant God made with Abraham and his descendants (verse 13), trusting in Yahweh's character as a covenant-keeping God. As God had responded to Abraham, so He responded to Moses, turning aside His wrath, at least for the moment.

THE BROKEN COVENANT AND ITS CONSEQUENCES (32:15-29)

When Moses and Joshua descended from Mount Sinai, the tumult was so raucous that Joshua thought there was a war going on. When Moses recognized the festival for what it was, he destroyed both the tables of the law and the Golden Calf itself. Both of these acts had symbolic significance.

The smashing of the tables of stone was a common practice connected with the dissolution of a covenant. When an agreement between two parties was terminated, either by being violated or by common consent, the clay tablets (in this case they were stone) upon which the covenant was engraved were destroyed to indicate that the agreement had come to an end. Thus when Moses broke the stone tablets, he was symbolically indicating that Israel's covenant with God no longer existed.

The destruction of the calf in verse 20 follows a pattern that appears elsewhere in the literature of the region (specifically in the library discovered at Ugarit). When a god was repudiated by a group of people, its image was utterly destroyed in this way, with the people actually consuming the image to put the final touches on the idol's demise, thus including all the people in the repudiation of the deity. The drinking of the remains was thus not a punishment, but a very tangible means of emphasizing to the people the impropriety of what they had done. It should be noted that the people were not repudiating Yahweh, but the image of Yahweh.

Moses then confronts Aaron, and the weakness of the elder brother again demonstrates the reason why God chose Moses rather than Aaron to lead the Israelites (though, one should recall, Moses was not much better during the meeting with God at the burning bush). Aaron was completely incapable of controlling the people, so Moses called the Levites to his side and ordered them to begin slaughtering the revelers. By the time the people realized what was happening and settled down, three thousand had been put to the sword.

ATONEMENT AND PUNISHMENT (32:30-35)

While Moses had demonstrated important qualities of leadership in his response to the worship of the Golden Calf, he here shows something even more important - the quality of a leader that causes him to put their welfare before his own. His willingness to suffer destruction so that the people could be spared is reminiscent of the words of Paul in Romans 9:3, and shows the kind of genuine love that is essential in order for one to lead effectively. As a result of Moses' intercession,

God does indeed restore His covenant with Israel, but not before destroying many more of the people with a plague that He sent into their midst.

CONCLUSION

Today's passage teaches several important lessons. The first of these is the importance of worshiping God in the way that He has designated. False worship of the true God is idolatry just as much as the worship of false gods, because we insult Him when we offer to Him worship that is the product of our own hands rather than giving back to Him what He has given to us. We also insult Him when we shape Him in our own image, rather than knowing Him only as He reveals Himself to us.

Secondly, today's passage illustrates the difference between worthy and unworthy leadership. Aaron gave the people what they wanted, while Moses gave them what they needed. Aaron was unable to control the people's reveling, while Moses hated sin enough to put a stop to it. And finally, Moses loved the people enough to sacrifice himself for their good if that was what was needed. In this, he showed himself to be, in a small way, like Christ Himself.

STUDIES IN EXODUS XIII

The Glory of God - Exodus 33:12-34:35

The narrative portion of the book of Exodus ends much the way it began - with Moses confronted with the presence of God. Only this time, it is Moses who seeks God's presence rather than being surprised by Him as he was at the burning bush.

MOSES' REQUEST (33:12-23)

As a result of the incident of the Golden Calf, God had threatened to withdraw His presence from the nation of Israel (33:3), promising to send an angel with them instead as they journeyed toward the Promised Land. Moses, in one of his frequent conversations with God at the Tent of Meeting, asked that the issue be resolved before the departure from Sinai, and in the process reminded God of His previous statements regarding both himself and the nation as a whole. God responded to Moses' arguments by promising that He Himself would accompany the Israelites on their journey. Moses then asked for confirmation in the form of a vision of the glory of God - a request to which the Lord agreed, in somewhat modified form.

A few obvious lessons can be drawn from Moses' attitude here. The first is that God's people absolutely require God's presence in order to proceed on their journey. Moses insisted that the Israelites would not leave Sinai unless the Lord accompanied them (33:15). The omnipresence of the Lord simply will not suffice. God's people must actively seek His presence if they are to find success. They need His protection, His guidance, and His oversight. Better to risk destruction at the hands of a holy God than to proceed without Him.

Secondly, Moses recognized the importance of the knowledge of God in his personal life. He had spoken with God face to face on many occasions, beginning with the burning bush, continuing through the period of deliverance from Egypt, in travels through the Sinai Peninsula, through the terrifying manifestations accompanying the giving of the law, and in conversations at the Tent of Meeting. Yet he still had a desire to know God better (33:13,18). The mark of a spiritual leader, and indeed of any godly person, will be a longing to know the Lord. Moses knew God in a way few have had the privilege of doing, yet he wanted more. God fulfilled that desire, limiting His self-revelation only to the extent necessary for Moses' own protection.

THE COVENANT RESTORED (34:1-28)

While it was Israel who had broken the covenant, God is the one who restored it. He summons Moses again to the top of Mount Sinai, instructing him to bring with him tablets of stone like the ones on which the Law had originally been inscribed. God then fulfilled Moses' request by revealing Himself to him, as indicated by the proclamation of His name (34:5-7). Name and character are inseparably intertwined in Scripture, and by speaking His name, God reveals who He is. His glory lies in the fact that He is "compassionate and gracious, slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness, maintaining love to thousands, and forgiving wickedness, rebellion, and sin."

Who can fathom an almighty God with such characteristics? Certainly not the ancient world, whose gods were capricious in the extreme. Yet our God is merciful without compromising His holiness - "He does not leave the guilty unpunished; he punishes the children and their children for the sin of the fathers to the third and fourth generation." A holy God demands personal and corporate responsibility ("the third and fourth generation" would be the entire clan, representing all living at any one given time).

In verses 10-26, God renews the covenant. We find here a sampling of much that has already been said in the book of Exodus. In verses 10-16, God renews His promise to give His people the land of Canaan and warns them to destroy the wicked inhabitants of the land with no mercy and no compromise. Such total destruction is essential for maintaining the purity of Israelite worship. In verses 17-26, we find a review of selected portions of the moral and ceremonial laws, all of which had been given previously in the earlier sections of the book.

Having reviewed the contents of the covenant, God instructs Moses to write again the Ten Commandments on the tables of stone he had prepared for that purpose (34:27-28). While some argue that the "Ten Commandments" written on the second set of tablets was the sampling found in verses 17-26, this fits neither the instructions given by God in 34:1 nor those found in Exodus 25:21 and 31:18.

It is also worth noting that Moses underwent a total fast for the forty days and nights he was in the mountain in the presence of God. It is true that one who has God needs nothing else; we find the same phenomenon when Jesus was in the wilderness being tempted by Satan. Moses hungered for the presence of God; when he found it, he was satisfied.

MOSES' RADIANCE (34:29-35)

One who enters the Lord's presence is changed by the experience. In the case of Moses, his visit with God resulted in a radiance that initially frightened the Israelites who saw him after his descent from the mountain. As they had begged to be shielded from the presence of God Himself when He had descended upon the mountain, so they needed to be shielded from the reflection of God's presence in the face of Moses - he wore a veil to mask even the secondary emanation of the glory of God.

Yet Christians today have the privilege of reflecting the glory of the Lord with unveiled faces (II Corinthians 3:18). We not only can know the Lord, we are in the process of being transformed into His likeness through the power of the Holy Spirit. Do we have a real understanding of the magnitude of the privilege that we have been given through Christ? That for which Moses humbly sought, and which set him apart from the rest of the people, is the common experience of God's people today. To what extent do we really experience the glory of God in our daily lives and manifest it to others by an internal radiance that is the identifying mark of the Spirit of God?