

# A BIRD'S EYE VIEW OF THE OLD TESTAMENT

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## SESSION THREE EXODUS

### 1. Deliverance

Freedom from slavery in Egypt

*Reading: Exodus 1:6-8, 1:22-2:10; 3:1-8a, 13-15; 12:21-32; 13:17-22; 14:5-6, 10-16, 21-24, 27-30a; 16:2-4, 13-15, 31; 17:1-7*

### 2. The Law

God's commandments and Mount Sinai

*Reading: Exodus 19:10-11, 16-20a; 20:1-17*

### 3. Kadesh Barnea

Place of rebellion against God

*Reading: Numbers 13:1-2, 25-33; 14:1-45*

### 4. Forty Years Wandering

Consequence of rebellion

*Reading: Numbers 20:1-13, 22; 21:4-9; 27:12-23*

#### **Discussion questions:**

Does the Christian observance of the Lord's Supper tell a story of deliverance?

Do the Ten Commandments represent a different form of slavery or a new freedom?

# 1. Deliverance

## Freedom from slavery in Egypt

Reading: Exodus 1:6-8, 1:22-2:10; 3:1-8a, 13-15; 12:21-32; 13:17-22; 14:5-6, 10-16, 21-24, 27-30a; 16:2-4, 13-15, 31; 17:1-7

The Hebrew people had been in Egypt since the time of Joseph but eventually a king came to power in Egypt who did not know about Joseph (Exodus 1:8). While the period of famine was only seven years it seems that the growing Hebrew people were comfortable and complacent in the fertile and prosperous area in which they settled. They had their own houses, flocks and herds. In any event, they would not have been ready to settle in the land of Canaan. While the 400 year period in Egypt seems a long time it serves to remind us that God operates on his time-scale not ours. In the latter part of this period the Hebrew people were forced to work on Pharaoh's building projects and had to make bricks without straw (meaning the bricks were much heavier and the work was harder). When the Hebrew population continued to grow Pharaoh ordered the extermination of all boys born to Hebrew women. In short, the situation was less like the slavery of the sugar plantations and more like that of the Irish people of the 19<sup>th</sup> century under repressive laws and discrimination.

The crocodiles of the Nile awaited the baby, Moses, but he was saved from the slaughter in an 'ark' (made of reeds) and was brought up partly by his natural Mother and partly by Pharaoh's daughter. This gave him useful experience without losing his own identity but his time in Pharaoh's court came to a sudden end when Moses murdered an Egyptian slave-driver and was forced to flee to Midian, to become a shepherd in the wilderness. This also turned out to be useful experience as Moses gained knowledge of a new way of life and strength from his work as a shepherd. Here, God revealed himself to Moses in the burning bush (Exodus 3) as the Covenant God of his forefathers, Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, and commanded Moses to lead God's people out of Egypt. Despite Moses' several efforts to excuse himself from this command, Moses ultimately obeyed but when Moses asked Pharaoh for spiritual freedom for the Hebrew people, Pharaoh refused. In judgment, God sent ten plagues of increasing severity upon Egypt, the last being the death of the first-born.

The Hebrews were protected from the 'smiting of the first-born' through the 'Passover', a ritual involving the slaughtering of a lamb and the daubing of the sign of the blood of the lamb on the doorposts and lintel of their houses. Being covered by the blood of the lamb is a theme that extends into the New Testament (John 1:29; 1 Corinthians 5:7). After this Pharaoh let the Hebrew people go. The most likely route for Moses to have taken would have been south into the land where he had been a shepherd. Later, Pharaoh changed his mind and chased the Hebrews to a shallow, marshy channel at the head of the Red Sea (the Sea of Reeds). Here, with Pharaoh's chariots in pursuit, the Hebrews looked back, Moses stood firm, but God called them onward - a useful lesson! By the powerful east wind (and perhaps an ebbing tide), God parted the sea and the Hebrew people crossed over, heading toward their destination, the Promised Land, but Pharaoh's forces perished (see Psalm 105). Exodus continues with the story of God's provision for his people.

The Exodus marked the beginning of Israel's national history. They received their freedom and became a nation in their own right – yet, they were a nation without a land of their own. The great spiritual significance of this event is highlighted by the nation's annual celebration of Passover. At first, the Israelites believed that their God was greater than all the gods of the Egyptians put together – he was *El Shaddai*, 'God Almighty'. Later, they would realise that the God of Israel was the only God who existed. There are no vowels in Hebrew. The Hebrew name of God (YHWH) was originally rendered Jehovah; the more modern translation is Yahweh. The name is a participle of the verb 'to be' which might be helpfully rendered in English as 'Always'.

The salvation history that we have here does not ask the same questions as our history books. God is all-important. The deliverance of the Hebrews was a foreshadowing of what was to come. Here the God who created everything becomes the redeemer of a special people whom he nurtures and who ultimately depend on him. We have often lost our sense of dependence upon the God who saves.

## 2. The Law

### God's commandments at Mount Sinai

#### Reading: Exodus 19:10-11, 16-20a; 20:1-17

After the account of Israel's deliverance, the second part of the book of Exodus concerns legislation. The giving of the Law is a most awesome and profound part of the Old Testament. This is indicated by the context, thunder and lightning, a thick cloud over the mountain which trembled violently, the increasing sound of the blast of the trumpet and billowing smoke. In the Old Testament, *Torah* (the Hebrew word translated 'Law') really means 'body of teaching or instruction' which has a rather wider meaning than our 'law'. Altogether there are 613 rules and regulations about how to live before God, the best known part of the Law is the Ten Commandments. God's giving the Law follows the deliverance of Israel from Egypt and shows that the Law is not a way to acquire merit with God and to be redeemed (or saved) by good works. It is a divinely revealed way of life for those God has redeemed.

"I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery."

(Exodus 20:2)

The Ten Commandments are similar to a treaty that a king might make with a conquered nation. In the Bible, this is referred to as a covenant, in which God makes promises and the people are given responsibilities and obligations. The Ten Commandments contain the great principles of law on which the rest is commentary. The first four commandments concern attitudes to God, the remaining six concern attitudes to others. A key word in understanding the Ten Commandments is respect – for the commandments are about 'respect for God, respect for his name, respect for people, respect for family life, respect for life itself, respect for marriage, respect for people's property, respect for people's reputation' – 'a healthy, holy society is built on respect' (David Pawson).

The covenant promise of God is that he will bless the people for obedience but curse them for disobedience. Unlike the earlier covenants this is with a nation and not just with individuals. First the Ten Commandments (called by some the 'Decalogue' or 'Ten Words') are given and these are followed by the national and ceremonial law. The powerlessness of the Israelites to keep the Law not only shows the completeness of the fall (into sin) but also demonstrates quite clearly that salvation can never come through legalism or good-works. Thinking you can be made right with God by keeping the Law is effectively a form of self-righteousness. While Christians are under grace and not under law, that does not exempt Christians from keeping the moral law. The most important part of the moral law is the Ten Commandments.

God is to be worshipped as God alone. Any image of God ultimately limits our understanding of him. God's name is not to be used for evil purposes, whether as a curse or to lie on oath. While Christians worship on the day of resurrection (Sunday) rather than the Sabbath (Saturday), the Sabbath's purpose as a day for God, for worship and for rest from the daily routine of work should not be missed. Although the fifth commandment specifically mentions parents, in spirit it could extend to the elderly. The next four commandments concern murder, adultery, stealing and false witness – all actions – but the last, not to covet, concerns an inward desire, no doubt with outward consequences. The relationship between the inward desire and the outward action is important as, in the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus showed the hypocrisy of trying to limit the commandments only to the outward actions.

As the Law so clearly exposed the sin of the people, a pattern of sacrifices soon followed. Covenant renewal (Deuteronomy 29:1; Joshua 24:25) was also probably a regular part of Israel's worship (see also Leviticus 16).

### 3. Kadesh Barnea

#### Place of rebellion against God

Reading: Numbers 13:1-2, 25-33; 14:1-45

The arrangement of the books of Exodus, Leviticus and Numbers gives the writer the opportunity to detail all that happened while the Israelites were camped at Sinai (Exodus 12-40; Leviticus 1-27; Numbers 1-10). This includes both narrative and legislation. Eventually, the Israelites moved from Sinai to Kadesh Barnea, an oasis and the southern gateway to the Promised Land.

As they travelled the Israelites moaned and disobeyed. They looked back to their former life in Egypt and remembered the food that they used to eat. 'They remember the delicious savouries – but forget the disastrous slavery' (Gareth Crossley). As David Pawson remarks:

'You need no talent to grumble, you need no brains to grumble, you need no character to grumble, you need no self-denial to set up the grumbling business. It is one of the easiest things in the world to do.'

When the Israelites reached Kadesh Barnea, Moses sent twelve spies to see the land of Canaan, one from each of the historic tribes. After nearly six weeks of thorough exploration, the spies returned with good news, it was a beautiful land flowing with milk and honey and with plentiful fruit (just as God had promised), and bad news, the cities were large and fortified and the people of the hostile armies were giants making the children of Israel look like grasshoppers.

The two spies who believed that the Israelites would be victorious in their attempt to take the land were Caleb and Joshua. They pleaded with the people:

"The land we passed through and explored is exceedingly good. If the LORD is pleased with us, he will lead us into that land, a land flowing with milk and honey, and will give it to us."

(Numbers 14:7-8)

The people, however, responded by accepting the report of the 10 other spies and this disastrous decision, clearly based on unbelief and disobedience (characteristics that are often found together, see Hebrews 3 and 4) was a great turning-point in the history of Israel.

Unbelief and pessimism are infectious. The same is similar with regard to faith and optimism. (A majority vote of the elected people of God still proved to be the wrong decision - we must be careful not to fall into the same trap. There is a place for realism but it must not exclude faith and hope in God.) Within sight of the Promised Land, the people of Israel lost sight of the promise and of God who made that promise to them. Consequently, instead of entering into a time of blessing, the Israelites entered into a time of judgment. They took 40 days to spy out the land but their time in the wilderness would be 40 years, a period of aimless wandering in the wilderness between the Mediterranean Sea and the two large forks of the Red Sea. 'Their history during this period is one of unbelief and fear, of quarrels and division, of rebellion and strife' (Gareth Crossley). It is a tragic example of how not to be the people of God.

The complex numbering of the Israelites is really registration for service. They are then equipped for service but all of this is spoiled by constant grumbling and unbelief. They moan about the journey, the food, the giants, their leaders, God's judgment, the desert and even about the manna God provided for them. No wonder that the Apostle Paul would later write to the Philippians, 'do everything without complaining or arguing' (Philippians 2:14).

## 4. Forty Years Wandering

### Place of rebellion against God

Reading: Numbers 20:1-13, 22; 21:4-9; 27:12-23

The 'Exodus-generation' was condemned for its rebellion against God and those who were 21 years old or more at the time of the rebellion would not enter the Promised Land. The wanderings took place in 'wilderness' rather than desert, what the geographer calls 'steppe' country. Additional information is given in the book of Deuteronomy, the fifth of the five-fold book (Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, Deuteronomy, also known as the Pentateuch) with which the Bible begins.

Little is recorded about the events during those long years in the wilderness but after the time of punishment the people returned again to Kadesh Barnea. Despite their discontent and complaining, God continued to provide for the Israelites but as the people camped at Kadesh Barnea one of the pressing issues was the supply of water. In the Sinai Desert, God had commanded Moses to strike the rock with his rod. In the limestone of Sinai, there are reserves of water held in the rock and these were released. At Kadesh Barnea, God told Moses not to strike the rock but to speak to it – a word would be sufficient to release water from the rock but Moses was so impatient with the people that he did not listen to God carefully and struck the rock twice, as though the provision of water depended on his exertion and not on God alone. As a consequence, God told Moses that because he had been disobedient he would not enter the Promised Land. The people then set out for Mount Hor, which is in the opposite direction and away from Canaan.

Once again, moaning and complaining broke out among the people. They described God's gift of manna from heaven as 'this miserable food' (Numbers 21:5) – a criticism not only of the gift but also by implication of the giver. In response, God's judgment came upon them and the camp of the Israelites was overrun with a plague of poisonous snakes and many of the people were bitten and died. In desperation the people acknowledged their sin and pleaded with Moses to pray for them. God's answer, that Moses should make a bronze snake and put it on top of a pole, is an interesting one. In the people's desire for forgiveness, there is hope for their future. Dislike and fear of snakes is pretty much universal but in biblical culture the serpent is also linked with the Evil One, the Devil. This bronze snake was unlikely to have been a work of art – instead it was a dramatic provision of the Lord to the needs of the people. As Ronald Allen writes:

The improbability of a person being able to survive a deadly snake bite simply by looking at a metal image of a snake held high on a pole is seized on by our Lord to affirm an even greater imponderability: "Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the desert, so the Son of Man must be lifted up, that everyone who believes in him may have eternal life" (John 3:14-15).

Just before his death, Moses was allowed to look across to the Promised Land. Moses, concerned that the people should not be like sheep without a shepherd, asked God, sovereign of all, to provide a leader for this second generation of wilderness-wandering Israelites. This is not someone that Moses could choose but it had to be the man that God chose. The successor to Moses was not chosen because of a blood relationship to Moses; he was not a king, he was not chosen by a popular election, but he was appointed directly by God.

God's response was to take Joshua (son of Nun) and consecrate him as the true successor of Moses. Joshua, one of the two spies that had pleaded with Israel to enter the land 40 years earlier, had been an assistant to Moses from his early youth (Numbers 11:28) and Moses was commanded to transfer power and authority onto Joshua by the touch of his hand. So that there would be no priestly objection to the appointment, Joshua also had to stand before Eleazar the High Priest, who could seek confirmation of the appointment through the mysterious Urim, thought to be used to cast lots.