

BIBLE SURVEY - THE PENTATEUCH

PREFACE

There are two ways of looking at a picture. You can stand some distance from it and look at the whole scene at once, or you can get up very close and look at the minute details of each portion. When it comes to the Bible, exegesis is like looking at a picture in minute detail where every phrase and word is examined to give the meaning of the text, whereas Biblical Survey is like standing back some distance to get the whole scene. It gives the broad outline of each individual book. And it is Biblical Survey that is the subject of this book.

This is the first of what we hope will be a series of booklets which will look at each book of the Old Testament. In this volume we consider the first five books of the Old Testament, the books of Moses, which are also called the Pentateuch. Their importance cannot be overestimated, as they answer the really big questions that men and women often ask. For example, 'How did we get here? Why are we here? Why is the world in the mess we find it in today? What does God have to say on the matter?' and so on. In particular it introduces us to the great plan of redemption, which Almighty God devised even before time began. This finds its ultimate fulfilment in the life, death and resurrection of his Son, the Lord Jesus Christ, whose coming, though over 1400 years after these five books were written, is foretold and portrayed in

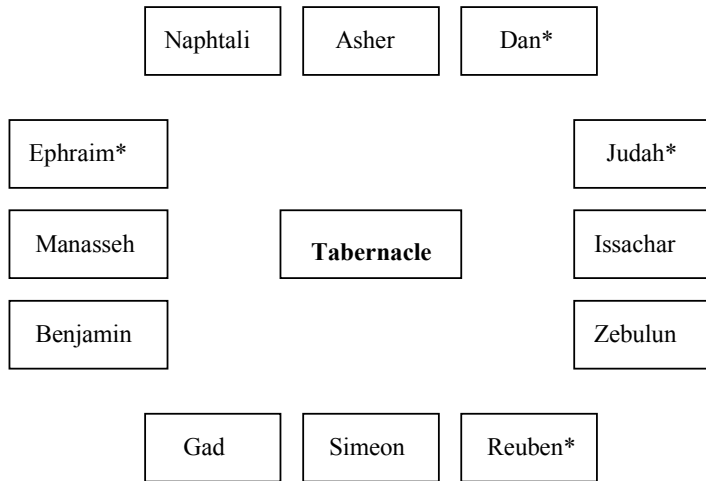
the sacrifices described in the Pentateuch. It also emphasises that it is God who chooses a people for himself in every generation, typified by his choice of Abraham and his descendants, the people of Israel.

I am indebted to Philip Parsons for his work in this book and for the series of radio talks on which this book is based for the *Serving Today* radio programme for pastors and church leaders. In addition to the survey itself Philip has also included some suggestions of what we might preach on from each of these books. Philip is particularly grateful for the Welwyn series of Bible commentaries and Dr Peter Golding the former pastor of Hayes Town Chapel near London, and the members of the church for the help received when he originally worked on the Old Testament.

Our labour will be more than compensated for if by reading these pages you will be encouraged to study this important section of the Word of God and to preach from it in your ministry.

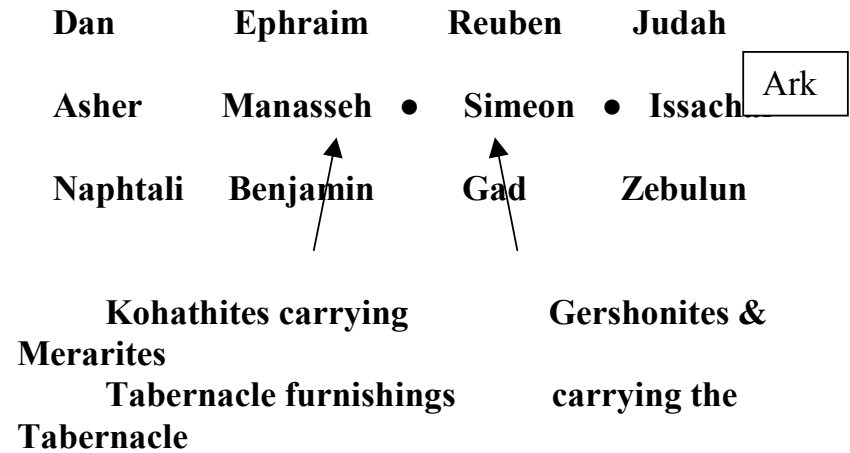
Derek French
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**Diagram 1
Israel's camp**

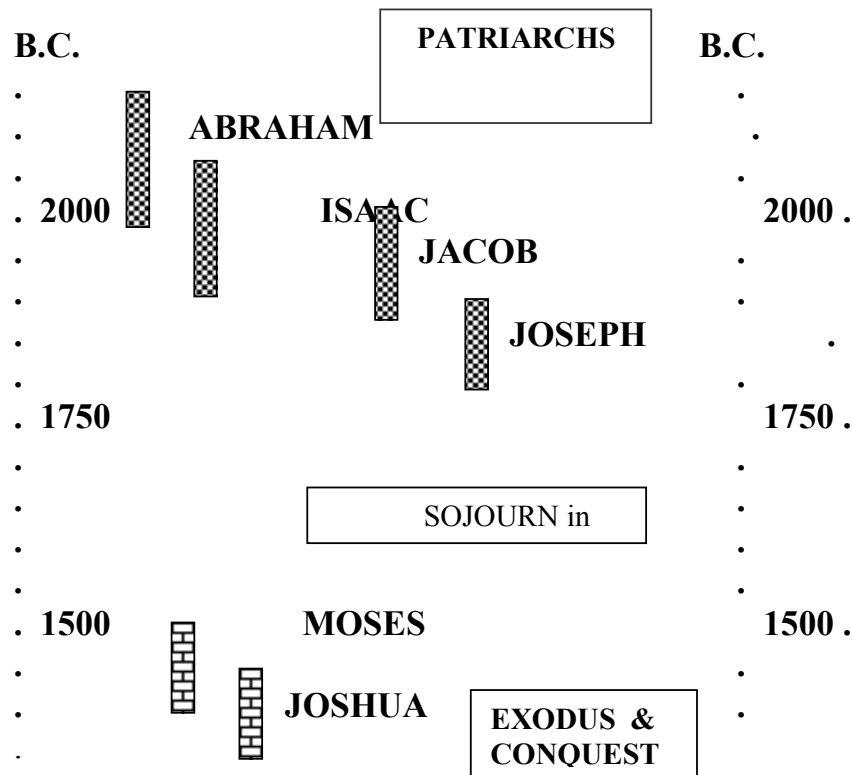


* These were the leading tribes in each group as indicated below

**Diagram 2
Israel's Marching Order**



PENTATEUCH TIME CHART



PART 1 : GENESIS

1. INTRODUCTION

The name ‘Genesis’ comes from the Greek word *geneseos* which can mean birth, genealogy, or history of origin. It is therefore an apt name for the book of the Bible which is all about beginnings or origins.

(i) The Author of Genesis

Traditionally both Jews and Christians have held that Moses was the writer or compiler of the first five books of the Bible. Acts 15:1 indicates that Moses was the author of Genesis, since the rite of circumcision prescribed by God for Abraham in Genesis 17 is referred to as the custom taught by Moses. For the past 200 years there has been a concerted attack upon the acceptance of Moses as the writer of Genesis and it has been claimed that several conflicting documents written between the 5th and 10th centuries BC were put together at this late period as the book of Genesis. Recent archaeological and literary research has confirmed Mosaic authorship. As is often the case the conservative view is proved with the passage of time to be the best view. Having said this, it seems clear that in writing the book, Moses drew on existing sources, which may well have been family records of the Patriarchs¹ which were handed down and preserved for posterity. One reason for viewing Moses more as a

¹ Patriarch means ‘father’ and is the name given to Abraham, Isaac, Jacob and his sons, because they were the fathers not only of the nation of Israel, but also of the community of the people of God in Old Testament times.

compiler than writer of the history of the Patriarchs, is that a Babylonian or Mesopotamian influence is detectable in the language of the early chapters. But an Egyptian influence is also present which is added confirmation that Moses was the author/compiler of the book as a whole.

There are also three later editorial adjustments relating to place names and the Israelite monarchy (14:14, 36:31, 47:11).

(ii) Date Of Writing

Having settled on Moses as the author, it is a comparatively straightforward matter to establish when it was written. Some think that he compiled the book while he was in Egypt. This seems unlikely, as initially his fellow Israelites did not accept him. He did not rise to prominence among them until the plagues and the Exodus, when God attested his leadership and he would only then have had access to the previous records of the nation. He also wrote the other four books of the Pentateuch during the 40 years of Israel's wanderings in the desert of Sinai and it would seem most likely that he also completed Genesis at that time. How do we know the date of the Exodus? 1 Kings 6:1 gives a very clear clue. It can be established that the fourth year of Solomon's reign was about 966 BC, so the date of the Exodus is about 1446 BC, with the entry into the Promised Land in 1406 BC. As with all biblical dates, mathematical precision is never their main purpose and there is often a rounding up or down of such figures, probably to aid memory.

(iii) What is its main theme and message?

It is a book of beginnings: of the heavens and the earth, of light and darkness, of the world as God made it and everything in it, of man as the lord of creation, of the institution of the Sabbath and marriage, of the entrance of sin, of the effects of sin, of the judgement of God upon the sinful pre-flood world, of new beginnings with Noah and Abraham and his descendants. It is also a book of relationships: between God and nature, between God and man and between man and man. It is thoroughly monotheistic and assumes that there is only one God worthy of the name. It therefore opposes polytheism, atheism and pantheism.²

It also introduces important theological concepts such as God's sovereignty over his creatures, his provision of redemption, the need for a sacrificial substitute and a profound definition of faith. More than half of the heroes of faith listed in Hebrews 11 are characters from the book of Genesis. And, interestingly, the first three chapters of Genesis find a distinctive echo in the last three chapters of Revelation, which fact alone gives us a wonderful confirmation of the book's divine authorship.

2. ANALYSIS

We now turn to a brief analysis of the book, that is, to divide it up into its most important sections. For although

² Polytheism teaches that there are many gods. Pantheism identifies God with all of nature. The God revealed in Genesis is one and distinct from his creation.

Genesis is a book of history, it is not just relating those things which happened, but it is a record of God's earliest dealings with his world.

(i) Creation

As you would expect in such a book it begins with the account of creation. In chapter 1 we have a description of events which can only have been observed by the Creator. Genesis 1, then, is a description of creation from a cosmic point of view – the heavens and the earth. When, however, we come to Genesis 2 the description is more from the point of view of Adam himself. It reads like a description of the first man drawing his first breath in the garden prepared by God, being introduced to the animals and then being provided with a helper who would be eminently suited to him in every possible way.

(ii) The Fall

Following the creation account, the book quickly moves on to recount the next major event in this world's history – the temptation and fall of man into sin. It is impossible to explain the state of the world today apart from an understanding of Genesis 3. And in an age when sin is not something that the world believes in and which is barely mentioned in the church, the importance of this fundamental chapter cannot be over emphasized. The reason why there is sickness in the world is because of sin. The reason why there is suffering in the world is because of sin, and the reason why there is death is because of sin.

How foolish we are to minimise sin as so many do today! Next to God it is the most powerful force in this world.

(iii) The Universal Effects of the Fall

In chapters 4 and 5 we have a description of the outworking of sin in primeval society – in the first murder, followed by a description of the ungodly line of Cain. We have too, the godly line from Seth, which had dwindled down to one family by the time of Noah when God had to make that awful pronouncement upon fallen mankind found in Genesis 6:5-7.

(iv) The Universal Judgement of the Flood

Chapters 6 to 8 describe that fearful calamity which overcame the whole of creation except Noah and his family, and the animals and birds he had with him in the ark. Just imagine the devastation! As more and more rain fell so the rivers swelled into raging torrents, sweeping all before them, and as they poured their contents into the sea they began to set up tidal waves with all the havoc and destruction which they can cause. The fossil strata of the earth's crust bear eloquent testimony to a catastrophe on a universal scale with many of the animals, and even fish, not dying through lack of food but being overcome suddenly and buried under thick layers of debris which also became fossilized as the depth of water increased. It was not until ten months after the rain started that the tops of the highest mountains were seen again!

(v) Further Decline and further Judgement

No doubt as Noah stepped out into the world after the flood with the covenant promise of God still in his ears, he hoped for better things than had been true of that evil world which had been destroyed. But if he had thus hoped he was soon disappointed, for the sorry tale continues in chapters 9, 10 and 11 until God had to come again in judgement at the tower of Babel, where all the languages were confused and the people scattered over the face of the earth. If the story of Babel teaches us nothing else, it shows us that the splitting up of mankind into many nations and languages has been God's way of keeping sin within bounds and restraining his further judgement from falling upon this world. Or, to put it another way, sinful men united are capable of greater evil and wickedness than when split into smaller groups.

(vi) The Life of Abraham

The call of Abraham in Genesis 12 marks a completely new beginning. Up until then God had dealt with mankind more or less on an individual basis, but now he calls a man whose physical and spiritual descendants he promises to bless. It is interesting to note that his father, Terah, was sympathetic to Abram's call, because he set out with Abram from Ur of the Chaldeans, although he did not complete the journey to Canaan, but died in Haran, which is about halfway (see Map 1).

The life of this great man of God is described for us in chapters 12 to 25. Characteristically, the Bible paints a picture not only of a man of great faith, courage, and godly

living, but also a man with weaknesses. Twice he tried to hide the fact that Sarah was his wife and on both occasions it caused trouble so that he had to be rebuked by the unbelieving kings, Pharaoh and Abimelech. He also gave in to Sarah's suggestion that he could father a child through her maid, Hagar. The results of that union are still with us today in the bitter conflict between Jew and Arab. But Abraham's strong points are also shown. His unselfishness is displayed in the first choice of where to live being given to Lot (13:8,9). He later risked his own life in a war to rescue Lot when he and others had been captured from Sodom and Gomorrah. He showed great compassion, too, on those sinful cities of Sodom and Gomorrah, when he pleaded with God to spare them if there were but ten righteous people in them. But perhaps what shines out the brightest is Abraham's relationship with his God. He had seen something of the glory of God and thus his supreme delight was to 'hear God's dictates and obey' even when it came to offering up his own son for a burnt offering. Such a man also took his covenant obligations seriously. He did not argue about the covenant sign of circumcision, even if he did not fully understand the implications of what he was doing. He believed God and it was credited to him as righteousness. So great is this man in the estimation of God that he is called 'the friend of God' (James 2:23).

(vii) The Life of Isaac

Compared with Abraham, Isaac's life was comparatively uneventful. Perhaps the most significant thing to mention about it is that when he blessed his sons, preference was given to Jacob, the younger, and this was upheld even though it was through the scheming of his wife Rebecca. This pattern of passing over the firstborn was to be repeated in the families of both Jacob and Joseph. Indeed, it is a significant repeating pattern throughout the Old Testament. Rarely is the firstborn son the most important. One lesson we can learn from the life of Isaac is that the 'ordinary' believer has his or her part to play in the plan of God, every bit as much as the 'greater' saints.

(viii) The Lives of Jacob and Joseph

The remaining history of the patriarchs unfolds from chapter 27 in the lives of Jacob and his eleventh son, Joseph. Perhaps one of the most striking characteristics of the life of Jacob is that it was marked by God's overruling grace. Jacob was naturally a devious man, a schemer, and an opportunist. And yet God dealt with him through his many and various experiences and trials so that he became one who prevailed with God. After stealing his brother's blessing he was forced to run away to his relative, Laban, still living in Haran. And in Laban, Jacob met his match. Though he worked for seven years for Laban's younger daughter, Rachel, he was tricked into marrying the elder, Leah. After his wives had borne him some eleven children and he had increased his flocks and herds at the expense of Laban, again he had to run away for fear of reprisal. Where was he to go? He had fallen out with Laban, but if

he returned to Canaan and his ageing father then he would have to face the wrath of his brother, Esau. It is against this setting that he wrestled all night with the 'angel of the Lord' who touched his thigh and put it out of joint so that Jacob, now renamed Israel, walked with a limp for the rest of his life. Such was the man who became the father of the twelve tribes of the nation of Israel. We can only view his life as a miracle of grace.

Shortly after Jacob had returned to Canaan, his father, Isaac, died and was buried in the family plot by his sons, Jacob and Esau. From chapter 37 onwards we have the history of the latter part of the life of Jacob and his family, which majors on the life of Joseph, his eleventh son.

Now the life of Joseph is one of those historical sections of the Bible which is truly amazing in its particulars. Here we have truth which is much stranger than fiction. A pious and very gifted, but pampered, younger son provokes the envy of his ten older half-brothers. They conceived a scheme to get rid of him by selling him as a slave to Arab traders and then telling their ageing father that a wild animal had probably killed him. His gaudy, multicoloured coat dipped in blood was shown to the father as proof.

The truth, however, was that Joseph, a handsome and very able young man, had not only become the slave of an important military official in Egypt, but because of his diligent and exemplary life was promoted to be the governor of Potiphar's household. But Potiphar's wife

cast her covetous eyes on this young man and tried repeatedly to persuade him into an illicit sexual relationship with her. After repeated refusals, she found a way of getting her revenge and accused him to her husband of the adultery to which he had never succumbed. So Joseph was thrown into prison where he languished for several years. But even there he adopted the principle, 'Whatever your hand finds to do, do it with all your might' (Ecclesiastes 9:10), and as a result became a right-hand man to the prison warder. The same was said of Joseph in prison as had been said of Joseph the slave – "the Lord was with Joseph" (Genesis 39:2, 23).

At the end of chapter 39 we find Joseph in prison in Egypt with no date fixed for his release, and the ageing Jacob back in Canaan still mourning the loss of his favourite son, a seemingly impossible situation. But the Lord was with Joseph, and that made all the difference. Then the required change was brought about by divine providence. Two of Pharaoh's servants, his butler and baker, had displeased their master and he had thrown them into prison. Shortly before their release, they both dreamed about what would happen to them and found that Joseph was able to interpret their dreams for them. And his predictions came exactly true, with the baker being hanged and the butler being restored to office. But the butler forgot all about Joseph and a further two years were to pass before Joseph was released and promoted to the highest position in the land under Pharaoh, again all because he was able to interpret Pharaoh's dreams.

The seven years of plenty and then famine portrayed in Pharaoh's dreams followed exactly as Joseph had said, so that because of his prudent recommendations, Egypt was the only place where food was to be found. It was therefore essential that Joseph's brothers should come to Egypt to buy food.

So the scene is set for a better final phase in the life of Jacob's family. After the high drama of the initial contact between Joseph and his brothers ending in their touching reunion, Jacob and his entire household were invited to join Joseph in Egypt. Then a better spirit prevailed within the whole family and the foundation was being laid for a great nation to emerge which was part of the promise to Abraham. The final two chapters of the book mainly consist of Jacob's prophetic blessing of his own sons as well as Joseph's sons, Ephraim and Manasseh, who were to be included in the twelve tribes of Israel.

Some of the many lessons which we can learn from the life of Joseph include such things as how to prosper in adverse circumstances, the example of a godly witness in a pagan society and God's gracious blessings upon the families of his people despite their waywardness. But the overriding theme of this section of Genesis is that God's sovereign plan is invincible, and yet includes all second causes however small and insignificant they may be. To him be all the praise and glory!

SERMON SUGGESTIONS FOR GENESIS:

1. The life of Abraham

- his strength, his faith, his courage
- his obedience and submission to God
- his holy living
- his compassion even on those who were under the judgement of God
- his weakness
 - He was not a perfect man
 - He had the weakness of calling Sarah his sister rather than his wife to try and avoid trouble
 - He was not a perfect saint
 - Also because the promise of God was delayed he agreed to fathering a son through Hagar which was not really the intention God had for the promise that he had given

Lesson: even great men of God are flawed; therefore our trust should be in the Lord not men.

2. Isaac an ordinary believer

- Isaac gives us encouragement as being a more ordinary believer
- Therefore the ordinary Christian does not have to feel useless or second-class – he has a part to play in the whole purpose of God.

3. A survey of the Life of Joseph

- How to prosper in adverse circumstances – Joseph a slave in Potiphar's house
- A godly witness in a pagan society – Joseph in Egypt, an ungodly society, where no one believed in the God of his father and of Abraham and Isaac.
- The invincibility of God's sovereign plan

- the fulfilment of the dreams God gave Joseph, even though his brothers thought they could stop their fulfilment.

(NB. All these suggestions could be a single sermon or made into a series of messages on each of these characters.)

PART 2 : EXODUS

1. INTRODUCTION

The name Exodus means 'exit' or 'departure' and those who translated the book from the Hebrew into Greek gave it that name. In the Hebrew it was named after the first phrase of the book, which is an abbreviated repetition of Genesis 46 verse 8 onwards. This really shows the continuity between the two books and leads us on to consider:

(i) The Author

Again, as with Genesis, the traditional view that Moses was the writer is much more satisfactory than the various liberal views. (One theory is that there were four different authors who presented conflicting accounts of the various events.) The evidence for Mosaic authorship is, in fact, very strong, both from the book itself (Exodus 17:14, 24:4, 34:27), a reference in Joshua (8:31) which refers back to Exodus 20:25, and several references in the New Testament (e.g. Mark 7:10, 12:26, Luke 2:22-23). It seems that to suggest any other author than Moses is a contradiction of the authority of the Bible as a whole.

(ii) Date Of Writing

From the texts we have already quoted it is clear that Moses wrote the book during the travels of Israel in the wilderness which were from 1446 to 1406 BC (1 Ki 6:1). Now, because of the name 'Rameses', one of the cities built by the Israelite slaves, the view has been put forward that the Exodus occurred some 150 years later (1290). But more recent archaeological discoveries support the earlier date, and the name Rameses may well have been inserted as an editorial change because of the change of name under a later dynasty of Pharaohs, who bore the name Rameses. A modern example of such a change is the town of St. Petersburg, which for more than 70 years was called Leningrad.

(iii) The route of the Exodus (see Map 2)

The wanderings of Israel for 40 years were in the Sinai desert, that triangular wedge of barren and inhospitable land which divides modern day Israel from Egypt. Mount Sinai itself is down in the south of the peninsula and God, through Moses, gave the Law in that place. Modern archaeological discoveries indicate that the approximate route of the Exodus was along the western edge of the peninsula to Mount Sinai itself and then up the eastern side to the border with Canaan. The actual crossing point of the Red Sea is unknown and the only data we have on that event is from the biblical record. This is not surprising, since such a crushing defeat of Pharaoh and his army would hardly be foremost in the records of the Egyptians who suffered it!

(iv) Major Themes***a. The revelation of God himself***

Compared with Genesis there is now a much fuller revelation of the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. And with this greater and fuller revelation there is also a greater awareness of the majestic holiness and awesome glory of God. Moses found this at the burning bush (3:5,6), and the whole nation was aware of it at Sinai (20:18,19).

Part of God's revelation of Himself to his people is the revelation of his name 'I AM' (3:14), which carries with it the concept of the one who is always present. The presence of God was visibly demonstrated in the pillar of cloud by day and the pillar of fire by night, which accompanied the people for the whole of their travels over

a period of 40 years. And on one occasion Moses pleads with God that if his presence were not to go with them, then he would rather that they did not continue. The other name by which God now reveals himself is 'the LORD', with its main meaning being 'the God who saves', or who redeems (6:6). The emphasis is upon his power to achieve his purposes of salvation against all his enemies. It is not exactly certain how this Hebrew word should be pronounced, but the familiar name 'Jehovah' is as near an equivalent as any.

But God also reveals Himself as a wonder-working God (15:11). And it is impossible to miss the signs and wonders worked through his servant Moses. Whether it is the signs to authenticate Moses before the elders of Israel, the ten plagues inflicted on the Egyptians, or the marvellous miracles including the crossing of the Red Sea, the manna in the wilderness, the water from the rock, etc, all these are manifestations of the God who was with Moses and they do not happen apart from Moses. They are the accompaniments of the further revelation of God to his people, which took place at that time.

Finally, God reveals himself as one who keeps his promises and remembers and cares for his people.

b. A change of administration of the covenant

The covenant previously established with Abraham now takes the form of a national covenant with Israel. It embodies not only the moral code of the Ten

Commandments reflecting the character of God, but also provides detailed instructions on the application of the commandments to national life. In addition a detailed system of worship is set up, centred around the tabernacle where the presence of God dwells. The description we are given of the Israelite camp in the desert is one of God dwelling among his people, a phrase which is picked up by the Apostle John in the 21st chapter of Revelation.

c. The theology of salvation

We have already seen that God revealed Himself as the Redeemer of his people. And this redemption is only possible because of the sacrificial death of a substitute, as portrayed in the Passover lamb. Where the lamb was not killed and its blood not put on the doorposts, the firstborn would die. By this means God was teaching his people the principle of substitutionary atonement. The Passover therefore, points forward to the final sacrifice on Calvary, when Christ, our Passover lamb, was put to death to secure the complete release of all his people from the tyranny and bondage of sin and Satan. For those who have eyes to see, the theology of salvation is being portrayed even at this early period of history.

2. ANALYSIS

Chapters 1 to 18 give a brief history of the nation of Israel from the birth of Moses to the arrival of the nation at Sinai. Chapters 19 to 40 contain details of the covenant and instructions for the making of the tabernacle.

(i) The early life of Moses and the Exodus

The story begins with Jacob's family numbering some 70 souls, now having multiplied, as God had promised, to become a nation of probably around a million. This rapid growth over a few hundred years gave the new dynasty in Egypt a real problem, as the threat of any fast-growing ethnic minority would do. So Pharaoh set the Israelites to work as slaves to build store cities for him. This action did nothing to curb the population growth, so a more drastic step was taken to order the Hebrew midwives to kill all male babies at birth. When this was unsuccessful a more rigid edict was given to everyone that all Hebrew baby boys were to be thrown into the river Nile. This edict led to the wonderful providence surrounding the birth and preservation of Moses. He was found by Pharaoh's daughter in a basket floating on the Nile and taken by her to be brought up in the very palace of Pharaoh himself. Who says that God does not have a sense of humour!

So Moses grew up and when he came of age he became aware of the cruel bondage of his own people under the taskmaster's lash. As the book of Hebrews tells us, he was faced with a choice: either to stay at court as the adopted grandson of Pharaoh, or to throw in his lot with God's people. And we know what he chose. But God's time was not yet right, so Moses was forced to flee outside the jurisdiction of Pharaoh to Midian, where he found a wife and became a shepherd, sometimes tending the sheep on the slopes of Mount Sinai. It was here, after 40 years, that God called him to one of the greatest tasks a man has ever

undertaken for God, the leading of the nation of Israel out of Egypt to the Promised Land of Canaan.

So Moses returned to Egypt armed with the miraculous signs God had given him. Here he confronted the new Pharaoh, possibly Amenhotep 2, with the command from Israel's God to "let my people go!". But Pharaoh would not listen; he hardened his heart. God confirmed him in that condition, so that it took the ten plagues of increasing severity and the ruining of Egyptian national life in order to force him to change his mind. After the death of all the unprotected firstborn on that fateful Passover night, Pharaoh was only too glad to let Israel go. What an amazing sight it must have been, a nation of several million with all their flocks and herds and possessions leaving Egypt with the pillar of cloud and fire going before them! But no sooner had they gone than Pharaoh regretted his decision and pursued them with the most powerful army of that time. God deliberately led his people so that there was no escape without going through the sea, which he dried up with a strong east wind all night. This meant that the Israelites could go through on dry ground with the water as a wall on either side. However, when the Egyptians tried to follow, God allowed them to enter the path through the sea, but then caused their chariot wheels to jam and, at Moses' command, the waters returned to drown the entire army.

No wonder there was such great rejoicing among the Israelite people! Not only were they free, but their enemy,

Pharaoh, and all his army were dead, no more to oppress them. Such, too, is the rejoicing of the soul set free from the bondage of sin and Satan.

So the journey to the Promised Land began. But, first, the people had to go to the mountain of God at Sinai to receive the covenant of the law, with all its attendant instructions for worship and the construction of the tabernacle where God would come down and dwell among them.

(ii) Giving the Law

The whole nation camped at the foot of Mount Sinai, and Moses approached the mountain to hear what God would say. First of all, God proposed the covenant, that he would be their God and they would be his people, his treasured possession. The people responded favourably to God's offer and agreed 'to do everything that the Lord has said' (19:8). They then prepared themselves for God to manifest Himself to them and to give them the covenant. And how awesome was the manifestation of the presence of God! Everything about it was designed to show the majesty and holiness and glory of God: the mountain burning with fire, the thunder, the lightning, the thick cloud and the loud sound of a trumpet. And then the very voice of God speaking those words, which are found in chapter 20, which we refer to as the Ten Commandments. So fearful was the sight that the whole nation was in fear and trembling. After that God did not speak any more directly to the people, but only through Moses.

After these awe-inspiring events Moses was called up into the mountain to receive the book of the covenant. This book of ordinances was the detailed outworking for them as a nation of the words spoken by God from the mountain. In chapter 24 we have recorded the covenant ceremony where the people agreed to keep all that was written in the book of the covenant and Moses confirmed the covenant by sprinkling them with sacrificial blood. Following the covenant ceremony, God graciously called Moses, Aaron and two of his sons, together with seventy of the elders of

the nation, to come partway up into the mountain for a covenant meal. They were given a sight of the God of Israel (24:9,10). It now remained for God to give them all the detailed instructions for the construction of the tabernacle which is where he would dwell with them and where they were to meet to worship him, particularly each Sabbath. For this part of God's revelation only Moses and Joshua went up into the mountain where they remained for nearly six weeks. In addition to all these instructions for the building of the tabernacle, Moses received the two tablets of stone with the Ten Commandments written on them with the finger of God.

(iii) Rebellion and Restoration

What happened to the nation who had been so eager to promise obedience to all God's commandments? They had become impatient with waiting for Moses and decided to organise the worship of God as they thought fit. And we all know the outcome: the golden calf, and the idolatrous and immoral worship which followed. How could they do such a thing when God had so recently revealed so much of Himself to them? It is a sad commentary on the wickedness of the hearts of even God's own people that this could ever have happened. They were out of control and running wild (32:25). And the church down the centuries, by not ordering its worship according to the word of God, has at times fallen into idolatry. May God keep us from this error today!

What was God's response to all this? At first he told Moses that he would destroy the whole nation and make a

new nation from Moses himself. But God listened to Moses' intercession and agreed that he would continue with the people. He did, however, send judgement upon them in the fearful slaughter executed by the Levites, who went through the camp with drawn swords and killed three thousand people. This was followed by a plague sent by God. However, unlike the Israelites, God did not go back on his word. He renewed the covenant and the two stone tablets that Moses had broken in righteous anger. The remainder of the book deals with the construction and setting up of the tabernacle – a copy of the heavenly sanctuary – followed by that marvellous ending when the glory of God descends upon and fills the tabernacle, so that even Moses is unable to enter it.

Perhaps one of the greatest lessons of the book is the utter inability of man to save himself or make any contribution to that salvation. If man is to be saved it must be all of God, all of grace.

SERMON SUGGESTIONS FOR EXODUS:

1. The life of Moses – lessons to be learned from various phases of his life:

- His birth and protection
- The time in the desert – development of patience
- Preparation for his life's work
- His call
- The events of the Exodus itself

2. The greatness of God:

- The revelation of Himself at Sinai and in the burning bush

- His glory, majesty and holiness
 - The way we approach him
- 3. Salvation and deliverance from sin:**
- Deliverance from the bondage of Egypt, compared with the Christian's deliverance from sin
 - The work and grace of God
- 4. Our worship of God:**
- It must be in accordance with God's instructions, as seen in the building of the tabernacle
 - Compare this with the incident of the golden calf
- 5. Moses' intercession on behalf of the people:**
- God allows Moses to put up arguments for the preservation of the people
 - God listens
 - Lessons for our own prayer life
- 6. God's faithfulness in spite of man's rebellion:**
- God remembered his people in Egypt
 - He sent Moses to deliver them
 - He keeps his covenant even though the people broke it
 - 'He remains faithful...'

PART 3 : LEVITICUS

1. Date of writing

We can establish the date when this book was written quite precisely, because we are told in chapter 27 verse 34 that God gave these commands to Moses on Mount Sinai.

Israel had left Egypt in 1446 BC and it took them three months to get to Sinai. Moses then spent three months on the top of the mountain, after which the tabernacle was built and the worship of God inaugurated. Leviticus, the book of instructions for that worship – when and how it is to be regulated – was thus written around 1445 BC.

According to Numbers 10 verse 11 the nation of Israel left Sinai on the 20th of the second month of the second year after they left Egypt.

2. Themes of the book

Two main themes dominate this book; holiness and forgiveness. They are, of course, related themes, for as soon as the holiness of God is declared, then the forgiveness of sinful man becomes necessary.

(a) Holiness

The word 'holy' or 'holiness' occurs some 152 times throughout the book, so it is clearly a major concept. When the word is used it is most frequently understood as meaning 'separateness' or 'consecration'. In the first place, God is wholly separate from his creation. Just as he is altogether apart, so too his people are to be separate from all the other nations upon the earth. They are to be separate in their worship of the only true and living God, who had revealed himself to them, and separate in their social relationships as those who are part of God's holy nation.

The other aspect of the meaning of the word holiness is that of perfection. God is perfect in his being and his ways, so he calls upon his people to be perfect also. This concept of perfection is brought out in the fact that all the animals used for sacrifice had to be 'without blemish or spot'. The priests who served in the tabernacle were to be without deformity. The people were thus being taught that God is a God who cannot tolerate the slightest imperfection of any kind. If sinful man is to be permitted to approach God without being destroyed, then a perfect righteousness is required for him to be allowed into the presence of God. But all this presupposes that his sin has first been dealt with.

(b) Forgiveness

Forgiveness is complementary to holiness, and the Israelites were being taught that, in no uncertain terms, by the sacrificial system set up by God in the early chapters of the book. No approach to God was possible without an offering for sin, whether the sin of an individual, of the priest, or of the whole nation. The requirement for forgiveness was being written in large letters for all to see. In addition, the people were being shown that without the shedding of blood there was no remission of sins.

(c) Atonement

The concept of substitutionary atonement was also being clearly portrayed, because an animal always had to die in the place of the worshipper.

In all these things, holiness, forgiveness and atonement, God was teaching those who had eyes to see that a perfect life and a perfect sacrifice was necessary for men and women to be able to have fellowship with their God. And only in the perfect life and spotless sacrifice of the Lord Jesus Christ, do these types and shadows find their complete fulfilment.

3. The offerings

There are five main offerings set down in the first seven chapters. The order they first appear in the text are the burnt offering (chapter 1), the grain or cereal offering (chapter 2), the fellowship or peace offering (chapter 3), the sin offering (chapters 4 & 5a) and the guilt offering (chapters 5b & 6a). The instructions to the priests for the implementation of the various offerings are given in chapters 6b and 7. In actual operation the order was different. Invariably, the first offering was the sin or guilt offering, followed by the burnt offering, the grain offering and, finally, the fellowship or peace offering. The reason for this order appears to be that the first need of the worshipper was for sin to be dealt with, either by a sin offering or, where restitution was in order, by a guilt offering. With atonement made for his sin, the worshipper could then present his burnt offering as an act of consecration to God, together with its associated grain offering, although the grain offering could be offered alone. He could then go on to offer a fellowship or peace offering which included a communal meal with the priest who had offered it for him. The spiritual significance of

the sacrificial system is thus established. First, sin had to be dealt with (sin or guilt offering); second, the worshipper committed himself completely to God (burnt offering and grain offering), and third, fellowship or communion between God, the priest and the worshipper was established (fellowship offering).

4. The priests

Chapters 8 to 10 give the instructions for the ordination of Aaron and his sons as priests, the actual ordination ceremony and what happened when two of them did not follow the instructions given. The priests were first presented before the Lord: they were washed, clothed in their special garments, anointed with oil, and offerings were offered by them for their own sins, to consecrate themselves and for fellowship with God and each other. They then had to remain in the tabernacle for seven days, after which they brought further offerings for themselves and the people. When all these offerings had been completed, Aaron turned towards the people and lifted up his hands in blessing, then Moses and Aaron went back into the tabernacle. When they emerged again, they blessed all the people. The glory of God appeared to the whole assembly and fire came out from the tabernacle and consumed the offerings on the altar. This acceptance by God of Aaron and his sons as priests caused great rejoicing and worship among those who saw it.

Would that I could end on that note of acceptance and praise. But no! Two of the priests, Nadab and Abihu, were

not satisfied with the fire of God to burn up the sacrifices. They brought their own fire for the same purpose and this time the fire of God came out of the tabernacle and consumed them. Among other lessons, one is surely this, that God will not share his glory with anything which we offer to supplement it. At first this judgement seems harsh, but there is a definite parallel in the New Testament in the case of Ananias and Sapphira. Both events occurred at the inauguration of a new era of God's revelation to his people. Both called down a swift retribution upon those who erred. With modern society's obsession with novelty, who can doubt that much strange fire is being offered in the name of God even today? May God have mercy upon us all!

5. The clean and the unclean

Chapters 11 to 15 deal with the whole question of what is clean and what is unclean. We need to remember at the outset that the covenant made with Israel, on God's part promised forgiveness and grace, but in response required obedience to all his commands. This is still true of the New Covenant, where our Lord Jesus Christ clearly expects his redeemed people to do all that he commands. So to show their faithfulness to God and his covenant, Israel had to obey him in all things. And in the light of what happened in chapter 10, who would be prepared to stand up and object to any of these laws?

There are laws about what kinds of meat the people were to eat, whether animals, birds, fish or insects. Then there

were regulations about personal uncleanness, particularly relating to blood, semen or infectious discharges from the body, and covering leprosy and other types of skin disorders. At first sight we may find it difficult to understand the need for all these regulations, but they certainly stand up to medical scrutiny and the rules for isolation and quarantine are absolutely sound. Also, the types of foods allowed are those least likely to cause disease by parasites or other infections. So the code of cleanness had both the object of marking out God's people in even the smallest detail of their lives, but also providing for the maintenance of the health of the nation. Even the purification required for women might seem somewhat onerous, but it did also release them from many normal duties during the period of their uncleanness.

6. The Day of Atonement (chapter 16)

This was undoubtedly the most important day in Israel's calendar. It was a day which the whole nation had to keep, a special Sabbath in which there was to be no work and in which they were to fast. Aaron had to offer sacrifices to make atonement for himself, his family, the tabernacle itself and then for the whole nation. It was the only day in which he was permitted to enter the most holy place, and then he could only do so with the sacrificial blood and incense burning on fire taken from the altar (not his own fire). He was to sprinkle the blood on the mercy seat over the Ark of the Covenant. While he was in the most holy place, no one was allowed into the tabernacle area; they were all waiting for him to come out and show that the

offering had been accepted. The animal offered for the sins of the people was one of two goats. After Aaron had reappeared, the sins of the whole nation were then confessed over the head of the other goat, which was then taken away by a fit man into a solitary place in the desert and allowed to escape. These graphic pictures, as the book of Hebrews clearly shows, were depicting the atoning work of our Lord Jesus Christ, who as our great high priest has offered his own blood and has carried away our sins so that they would be forgotten forever. The only part of his fulfilment of this Old Testament ritual which is still outstanding, is his appearance for the second time from the most holy place of heaven, not to bear sin, but to bring salvation to those who are eagerly waiting for him (Hebrews 9:28).

7. Israel's code of holiness (chapters 17 – 20)

As would be expected the laws laid down here cover a wide range of subjects. First of all, all animal sacrifices were to be carried out in the immediate vicinity of the tabernacle. There seem to be two reasons for this prohibition: firstly, to prevent any sacrifice to any false god (17:7), and secondly, to ensure that the priests were provided with food from those sacrifices. Then there are the restrictions about eating blood, with the reason given that the blood of animals sacrificed symbolised the means of atonement and, therefore, it was to be regarded as sacred. There is also another recognised health reason that it is the blood of the animal which begins to decompose very quickly after its death, especially in a hot climate.

The further area of legislation relates to whom it was lawful to marry. The list shows that all forms of incest were forbidden. In a nomadic closed community such regulations were essential to prevent the kind of weaknesses which could occur from inbreeding. But there were also restrictions on marrying non-blood near relatives. This restriction would have the effect of preventing a family from becoming too powerful and over-dominant in the community. It goes without saying that all the forbidden relationships within the marriage bond were also forbidden outside it. In addition all forms of sexual perversion were clearly prohibited. Israel was to stand out as holy among the other nations around them who did practise these abominations.

Chapter 19 gives an expansion of many of the Ten Commandments into details of community life, while chapter 20 provides the punishments for various offences. In this section, provision is made for the poor but they had to work for these benefits (19:9,10). It was not a handout; the poor had to glean from the fields and orchards.

8. Rules for Israel's priests (chapters 21 – 22)

Obviously, the priests were to obey all the commandments which had been given to the nation as a whole, but in addition there were stricter requirements for them. Those who offered sacrifices at the altar or who went into the holy place were to have no physical deformity of any kind and could only marry a virgin. The standards required for

them are meant partly to portray the perfection of Christ, our great high priest, but also to emphasise the sacredness of such an office. One lesson we can learn from this is that although high standards are expected from all Christians, the lives of church officers should be exemplary, although they should not be punished for the sins of their grown-up children (21:9). It is important to note that in the New Testament the title 'priest' is never used of a minister of the gospel. It is used to describe the priests in the temple at Jerusalem and when it refers to the Old Testament priests. It is also used of every Christian believer for we are priests unto God. The chief use is of the Lord Jesus Christ who alone is our great high priest and by whom alone we can draw near to God. We do not need an earthly priest because of Christ's priestly office.

9. Special seasons and years (chapters 23 – 25)

In addition to the Sabbath, the Passover and the Day of Atonement, which had already been instituted, there were four other festivals which were to be observed: the Feast of First fruits of the harvest, to recognize the Lord's bounty from the land, the Feast of Weeks (seven weeks after the first fruits) to show joy and thankfulness for the blessing of harvest, the Feast of Trumpets where the nation were to present themselves before the Lord for his favour, and, finally, the Feast of Tabernacles to commemorate their journey from Egypt to Canaan and give thanks for the productivity of the land.

In addition to all these annual feasts there were to be special years. There was to be a sabbatical year every seventh year, where they were neither to sow nor reap, but to eat only what the land produced by itself. It seems that they often neglected this ordinance as chapter 26 indicates.

Finally, every fiftieth year was to be a Jubilee, when all debts were to be cancelled and property reverted to the family of its original owners. This stipulation was clearly intended to prevent either excessive poverty or wealth in the nation.

10. Blessing and curse (chapter 26)

The book draws to a close with the promise of blessing for obedience, and punishment for disobedience, of God's commands. And the prophetic statements towards the end of the chapter were remarkably fulfilled in the deportation to Babylon some 800 years later. The promise too (v40), that God would bring them back from captivity, was clearly understood by Daniel in his great prayer of confession and intercession of Daniel chapter 9.

11. Freewill offerings (chapter 27)

The final chapter of the book provides instructions for offerings, which the Israelites might wish to bring, over and above what was required. Vows were never mandatory, but if made were to be properly ordered. And surely this final chapter in a book of so many detailed rules and regulations is pointing forward to the New Testament era where the believer who has been blessed by God does

not merely content himself with a tithe of his money and a minimum of his time, but offers himself and all he is and has as a living sacrifice to God, which is his spiritual worship (see Romans 12:1-2).

SERMON OUTLINES FROM LEVITICUS

1. Holiness:

- Separateness and purity
- God is perfectly holy: although not perfect, his people must be holy too
- Levitical laws marked out Israel as a holy nation. Christians likewise are to be separate from the world both in their worship of God and their social relationships

2. Sin:

- Separates us from God and must be atoned for if we are to approach him
- God has appointed a substitute – illustrated by animal sacrifices – all pointing to Christ, the Lamb of God (John 1:29)

3. The spiritual significance of the sacrificial system:

- First – sin must be dealt with (sin and guilt offerings)
- Second – we should give ourselves to God (whole burnt offering and grain offering), cf. Romans 12:1-2
- Third – fellowship restored with God and others (fellowship offering)

4. Lessons from the Day of Atonement:

- God is holy and we can only come into his presence through his appointed representative (Jesus Christ, now our high priest)
- All sin must be atoned for by the shedding of blood
- Substitutionary atonement is central to salvation
- God in Christ has carried our sins away and will remember them no more (the scapegoat)
- Christ (our great high priest) has yet to appear a second time – true believers eagerly await his appearing
- Fasting – mandatory for the Day of Atonement, not abolished in the New Testament (cf. Matthew 6:16-18)

5. God's work and worship should be carried out in his appointed way:

- The strange fire incident illustrates this (ch 10).
- God will not share his glory with another.
- Judgement for deviations from God's appointed way is now usually deferred to the Day of Judgement (cf. 1 Corinthians 3:10-15; see also Hebrews 12:28, 29)

PART 4 : NUMBERS

This book, the fourth book of Moses, is called Numbers, because it begins with the census of the tribes of Israel as they prepare to leave Sinai. The name of the book in the Hebrew Bible is 'Wandering in the wilderness' because the book also describes the 40 years the Israelites spent in the desert before entering the Promised Land of Canaan.

1. Author and date of writing

I have already referred to the book as the fourth book of Moses, which finds direct support in the statement of chapter 33 verse 2, and also the repeated statements of instructions given by the Lord to Moses. As their appointed leader for the whole of the period covered, it would also be reasonable for him to have written the book. It is clear, however, that there were editorial additions (e.g. 12:3). So we can say that the main substance of the contents was written by Moses but that some editorial changes were made subsequently, possibly by Joshua. The period of history covered in the book is around 40 years from 1445 to 1405 BC.

2. Themes

In contrast to Exodus and Leviticus where God, his glory, his covenant, the way he is to be approached and his requirements of holiness for the lives of his people are the main themes, we do not have to go very far in the book of Numbers before we realise that we are in a different league.

(i) Israel's miserable failure

From chapter 10 onwards it is a record of Israel's miserable failure at every point. The book tells of the murmuring and rebellion of God's people and of his subsequent judgement of them. Those whom God had redeemed from slavery in Egypt and with whom he had made a covenant at Mount Sinai, responded not with faith,

gratitude and obedience, but with unbelief, ingratitude and repeated acts of rebellion. The high point of this appalling behaviour is the people's refusal to undertake the conquest of Canaan (chapter 14). By so doing, the community of the redeemed were condemned to live out their lives in the desert, where they would all perish. Only their children would inherit the blessings which would have been theirs if they had not rebelled and disobeyed God. It is a sorry and depressing tale of human failure, not resulting from extreme temptation, but from sheer sinful response to a God of glory, mercy and grace. The book of Numbers is a commentary in living flesh and blood of the statement by the prophet some 800 years later, that "the (human) heart is deceitful above all things and desperately wicked" (Jeremiah 17:9 AV). It also demonstrates that if God's covenant people reacted in this way and brought down the judgement of God upon their heads, then how could we possibly expect those outside the covenant community ever to respond any better. The whole idea is ridiculous. The writer to the Hebrews, in chapter 3, uses this theme of Israel's rebellion and unbelief as a warning to us not to fall away from the living God.

(ii) God's longsuffering and patience

Despite their unbelief and rebellion, God did not break his covenant with his people. It is true that he did judge them, but he was always ready to hear Moses' intercession for them. They were unfaithful, but he always remained faithful. As Paul, quoting Isaiah 65:2, says in Romans 10:21, 'All day long have I held out my hands to a

disobedient and obstinate people.' How often we are ready to blame God for evil which befalls us, but the message of Numbers is that the fault is never on God's side but always on our own. If God's people today would turn from their disobedience and evil ways and turn in repentance and humility to God then surely he would pour out upon them such blessing that there would not be room enough to contain it!

3. ANALYSIS

The first section of the book (chapters 1-10), takes up the account where Exodus leaves off and tells of the arrangements for the journey of the people of God to the land of promise.

(i) The census, the Israelite camp and the Levites (ch 1-4)

Before beginning the journey there was a census of the fighting men of the nation, tribe by tribe. In this headcount we see the prominence of the tribe of Judah, a fulfilment of Jacob's deathbed prophecy in Genesis 49:8-10. As the fighting men, who numbered 600,000, were approximately half of the total male population, this meant that the nation had grown to around 2½ million. Some liberal scholars have said that this number of people could never have lived for so long in the desert. Under normal circumstances this would be true, but seeing that many aspects of their lives were governed by miraculous divine intervention, the large numbers should not surprise us. By any standards, this army was considerable and the military census was a reminder to

them that they would have to fight to gain possession of the Promised Land. Note that there were no women in the armed forces!

As well as organizing them as a fighting force, God gave them specific instructions relating to the layout of the camp (see Diagram 1). Even here we see the wisdom of God. The grouping of the tribes on the four sides of the tabernacle was of those who were most closely related. On the east and first in the march were Judah and the two youngest sons of Leah. Reuben and Simeon, the oldest sons of Leah, were not put under Judah but were encamped on the south with Gad and were second in the march. On the west were the sons of Rachel, and on the north the remaining tribes. Between the camp of the tribes and the tabernacle were the Levites who had responsibility for the holy things both in the camp and when on the march. In this camp layout we see a foreshadowing of John's vision of heaven in Revelation 4, where the people of God surround the throne. Except when coming near for worship, the ordinary people had to be at least 1km from the tabernacle (Josh 3:4), whereas the unclean were not even allowed into the camp at all.

(ii) Dealing with sin, consecration to God and priestly blessing

Chapter 5 emphasizes the need for both confession of sin and restitution, and follows with a specific example of dealing with private sin, where there could be no witnesses. This example was probably given because the

sin may have been a particular problem at that time. A man's unfaithfulness was proscribed by the 10th commandment. In any case, it was to be God who would judge by means of the ritual of the bitter water.

Chapter 6 strikes a more positive note with regulations for those who wished to dedicate themselves in a special manner to the Lord and his service (the Nazirites – holy ones, but not monks). The chapter ends with the familiar words of the priestly blessing to be used by Aaron and his sons, particularly on the Day of Atonement (6:22-27).

(iii) Consecrating the tabernacle and the Levites, and keeping the Passover

At the end of Exodus, Moses had set up the tabernacle with all its furnishings and utensils. In Leviticus the priests had been consecrated to God. It now remained for each of the tribal leaders to bring their offerings for his own tribe. The Levites also were consecrated to commence their duties particularly in connection with the moving of the tabernacle from place to place. And finally, one year after the first Passover, the whole nation kept the Passover again. Notice that it was mandatory for all and a supplementary date one month later was given for those who had been legitimately prevented from the main celebration. One lesson for us today is that all believers under the New Covenant should regularly partake of the Lord's Supper.

The whole nation was now ready to leave Sinai and march to the Promised Land. When the pillar of cloud lifted off the tabernacle they were to break camp and set off on their march, with the order of setting out being controlled by the blowing of silver trumpets (see Diagram 2).

Chapter 10 ends with an evangelistic postscript in which Moses persuades his brother-in-law and family to join the people of God. Moses, the Levite, was carrying out his function as a minister of God. Evangelistic concern should be high on the agenda of every true minister of God today.

These first 10 chapters of Numbers have been described by one commentator as the 'ideal' Israel. There is certainly no hint of the trouble that is to follow.

(iv) Complaining (ch 11)

It was not long before the people began to complain about the hardships of the journey. Certainly, the desert south of the Promised Land is a very inhospitable place, probably more barren and inhospitable than Sinai had been. So the people began to grumble and complain about their circumstances. God had to judge some of them by fire as he had done in the case of the sons of Aaron at Sinai. Yet notice Moses' intercession for them.

Then some of the foreigners among them (the rabble) started to complain about the manna, craving the food of Egypt, and all the families of the Israelites soon joined in the complaint. How easy it is to get a following for a

complaint even among the Lord's people! As their leader, Moses felt this grumbling keenly, but he did the right thing, he poured out his complaint to the Lord. So God graciously provided assistance by giving some of the Spirit which Moses had to seventy of the elders of the nation. God also gave them the meat, which they had craved, in the form of quails, so much so that the birds lay thick on the ground for several miles around the camp. But God also sent a plague with the quails so that many died in that place.

(v) Leadership challenge (ch 12)

The next problem for Moses came from a most unexpected quarter, from his own brother and sister. The complaint started on account of Moses' wife who was not an Israelite. But the real issue was an attack on Moses' leadership. In one sense God had spoken through Aaron and Miriam, for Aaron was Moses' mouthpiece and Miriam was a prophetess. But notice how God answered them. He had chosen Moses, so this challenge was against the authority of God himself. The leprosy which afflicted Miriam was but a mild chastisement for her rebellious action and was taken away in response to Moses' intercession for her.

(vi) Exploration and rebellion (ch 13-14)

And so they reached the borders of the Promised Land. The twelve spies were sent out, to return with their report after 40 days. The report was mixed, but those against the invasion were in the overwhelming majority. At the

instigation of the ten spies, the whole nation refused to go up and invade. So God took them at their word and sent them back into the desert, to wander round for nearly 40 years. Some tried to reverse this decision but were driven back. But notice in verses 1 and 2 of chapter 15 that God had not gone back on his promise.

(vii) Korah's revolt (ch 16)

This revolt also came from an unexpected quarter, from the Levites. It seemed that they thought they had the right not only to serve the Lord as Levites but also as priests. And they had obtained the backing of Dathan and Abiram from the tribe of Reuben. But really it was all a chafing at God's appointed order and the consequences were disastrous. The earth opened up and swallowed Dathan and Abiram and their households, and fire from the Lord consumed the 250 Levites. And if that were not enough, the whole nation rose up against Moses and Aaron and when God sent a plague to destroy them, it was only stayed by their swift action to intercede. To underline Aaron's divinely appointed position, God caused his rod to bud overnight and produce blossoms and almonds.

This section of the book of Numbers is a sorry catalogue of Israel's sins. The words of God through the Psalmist in Psalm 95:8-11 are a melancholy commentary on this whole period of Israel in the desert. At the very least, it shows us the exceeding sinfulness of sin and the righteous anger of a holy God against it. May God help us to avoid their sins,

whether it be in grumbling about our circumstances, or rejecting those whom God has put as leaders over us.

(viii) Turning point (ch 20-21)

Numbers chapter 20 marks a new beginning in the life of the nation. The people had now arrived back at Kadesh, where they had been 38 years earlier and had refused to enter the land. The chapter opens with the death of Miriam aged about 130. Soon after, Aaron was given his marching orders and at 123 he died on the top of Mount Hor. And in a year or two Moses too would have gone. They were the last of the old guard and made way for a new era under Joshua.

There was a difference too in the way in which God dealt with the people. He responded to their complaint about water with a miracle, although Moses and Aaron appeared in a bad light at this incident. Moses showed an uncharacteristic lack of humility in calling the people 'you rebels' and showed lack of faith and a thoroughly bad example. So God had to chastise them by forbidding their entrance to the Promised Land. And in the incident of the bronze snake, God's response to the nation's sin is more in grace than with judgement, a point that our Lord was not slow to point out in John chapter 3.

The people were also more ready to fight for the Lord in reliance upon him, and there were notable victories recorded against the Amorites. Even the place name of their first victory was changed to Hormah (21:3), the place

of their first defeat 38 years earlier. But notice that they did not attack the Edomites. The divine judgement was to be only upon those nations whose cup of iniquity was full.

(ix) Balaam, the hireling prophet (ch 22-25)

The victories of the Israelites were becoming famous and some of the threatened nations were concerned. In particular, Balak, king of Moab, and the Princes of Midian decided to hire the Mesopotamian prophet, Balaam, to curse this Israelite nation which was on their borders. So Balaam came all the way from 'the river'. However, when he began to speak, he not only did not curse but rather blessed Israel and made wonderful predictions concerning their future. This was a case where the Spirit of God overruled the evil intentions of a man, without changing his heart. Balaam was prevented from cursing Israel, but he did take revenge by advising the Moabites and Midianites to seduce Israel with harlotry and idolatry. This seduction was obviously no small thing and it aroused the anger of God to pronounce the death penalty on the leaders who were either guilty themselves or had allowed the sin in others. Clearly, a large part of the nation began to repent and wept before the Lord, when an Israelite man arrogantly paraded his Midianite girlfriend before the whole assembly and then took her off to his tent and his guilty bed. At this, God began to send a plague among the people. One of the priests, Phinehas, acted quickly, and following the couple to the tent, thrust them both through together with a spear. He was highly commended for his prompt action and no doubt saved the lives of many of his

fellow Israelites as the plague was stopped, but not before 24,000 had died. Vengeance was later taken on the Midianites for their seduction and, in the battle (ch 31), the evil prophet, Balaam, was also killed.

(x) The second census (ch 26)

All the fighting men who had refused to enter Canaan on the first opportunity had now died, so another census of the nation was taken with their numbers being almost the same as the census at Sinai. God had judged his people, but he had also preserved the nation, an essential requirement, for it was out of Israel that God would send his Son.

(xi) Final instructions

The book ends with a reminder to the people of the days and feasts they were to keep to the Lord, a detailed description of the boundary of the land, and the setting up of cities for the Levites and cities of refuge for those guilty of accidental killing. There is also an interesting section on the property rights of women in a family where there were no men left.

The Israelites are now in the plains of Moab, ready for the conquest of Canaan.

SERMON OUTLINES FROM NUMBERS

1. God's faithfulness and Israel's unfaithfulness:

- God keeps his promises
- God provides for his people's needs

- God bears with their evil ways
- Israel responds in unbelief, ingratitude and rebellion
- The church throughout history has often been like Israel – departing from the living God
- If God bears with our unfaithfulness, how much more could we receive from him if we showed more faith, gratitude and obedience

2. Moses – the Man of God:

- His humility (12:3)
- His longsuffering, when the people grumble against God and attack his leadership
- His intercession – not complaining about God, but by complaining to him
- His failure – he responds angrily and strikes the rock
- The record of Moses' faults is a proof of the truthfulness of Scripture

3. The complaints of God's people:

- Should initially be listened to – sometimes a remedy is required
- Are usually not without sin
- Can often affect others – many can be defiled
- Can result in unjustified attacks on leaders
- God may sometimes give way to our complaints as a chastisement
- True contentment is the antidote to complaining

4. Lessons from the life of Balaam:

- Accurate prophecies – the future of Israel and the coming of the Messiah

- His heart was not right with God
- He takes revenge on God's people – encourages immorality and idolatry
- Gifts are no guarantee of godliness (cf. Saul and Judas)

PART 5 : DEUTERONOMY

The book of Deuteronomy follows on from Numbers. Its main content is a series of addresses given to the people by Moses while they were in the plains of Moab, on the other side of the river Jordan to Jericho, near to where the Jordan flows into the Dead Sea.

1. Author and date of writing

Of all the books of Moses there is the most evidence that Moses was the author of Deuteronomy, although again there are editorial additions, particularly chapter 34, which is the account of Moses' death. As well as the book itself claiming Mosaic authorship, there are many references elsewhere in the Bible where Moses is spoken of as the writer, notably in the Gospels by the Lord himself. In all, there are nearly 100 quotations from or allusions to Deuteronomy in the New Testament alone (e.g. 'The Lord will judge his people' (Heb 10:30), 'The word is very near you; it is in your mouth and in your heart' (Romans 10:8), 'You stiff-necked and uncircumcised in heart and ears' (Acts 7:51)).

According to the approach to dates which we have followed, the book was written in 1406 B.C.

2. Purpose of the book

Moses was about to transfer the leadership of the nation to Joshua, and in discharging that responsibility he gave this series of farewell addresses to the whole nation. These extempore addresses were designed to prepare the people for the new phase of their life that was about to begin: the conquering and settlement of the Promised Land. These addresses were, in fact, a renewal of the covenant and thus the title of the book is appropriate meaning, 'repetition of the law'.

3. Style

Much of the content of Deuteronomy can be found in Exodus, Leviticus and Numbers, but one of the most significant features of the book is its personal and sermon style. Moses was emphasising here those aspects of the law which he considered to be most appropriate to the situation, but he applied them to his hearers with a warmth which sprang from a commitment to what he was saying and a true understanding of the message he was proclaiming.

4. Theological teaching

For those who think of the Old Testament only in terms of the blazing fire of God's presence upon Sinai, the emphasis upon love in this book may come as a surprise. Moses repeatedly exhorts his hearers to love the Lord their

God and is anxious to emphasise the love that God bears to his people. It is therefore not surprising that the spiritual emphasis of this book and its call to total commitment to the Lord in worship and obedience prompted the subsequent writers of the Bible to make frequent references to it!

5. First address (1:6 to 4:40)

In this address, Moses surveys all the way God has led the people as a nation over the past 40 years since leaving Egypt. He reminds them of God's mighty acts – the many miraculous signs which had been given, his care of them for these 40 years and the help that has been afforded in their battles against the kings of the Amorites. He also dwells on their many rebellions: at Sinai, in the wilderness and particularly at their first approach to the Promised Land, which on their refusal resulted in the 40-year delay. God will carry out his purposes, but if we disobey him he may exclude us from his choicest blessings in this life. In this sermon, Moses refers to the fact that he, too, is forbidden entry to Canaan. He does not sulk about it, but exhorts and encourages the people to obey God, to walk in his ways, to keep his commands and to avoid idolatry at all costs. As he brings the sermon to a close, there is a powerful reminder of the infallible proofs God has given to them that he is the only true God and therefore the only one worthy of their worship (4:32ff). The only fitting response to such a God is obedience and faithfulness to him in all things.

6. Second address (5:1 to 28:68)

This address takes up the major portion of the book. In it Moses reiterates many of God's commands that have already been given, but also applies them to the consciences of the people.

He begins with a restatement of the Ten Commandments and the awe-inspiring circumstances in which they were given. In chapter 6 he exhorts them to love, to fear, to serve the Lord their God and not to forget all that he had done for them as a nation. (This alone is one reason why we should study church history.) Moses then moves on in chapter 7 to encourage them to be diligent in driving out the nations currently inhabiting Canaan, but not to take on board any of their idols with all their associated detestable practices. When they come into the land they are not to forget God, particularly when in prosperity (chapter 8). In chapter 9 Moses again reminds them of their rebellion and idolatry with the golden calf at Sinai. In memory of those events they are to fear the Lord and to love and obey him. This introductory section of the sermon ends with both blessings and curses: blessings for obedience but curses for disobedience, symbolised by two mountains in the Promised Land – Ebal and Gerizim.

From chapters 12 to 26 Moses spells out in detail how the people are to obey the Lord. As well as an exhortation to keep the commands already given in Exodus and Leviticus there are additional requirements that particularly relate to the conquest and settlement of the land.

God would choose one place for his worship. He tells them how to deal with the prophet whose message contradicts God's Word even though he performs signs and wonders. There are instructions for the setting up of law courts and the choice of a monarch. There are stipulations for the minimum of two or three witnesses in lawsuits. Then there are rules for conduct of war, particularly when besieging a city. These additional requirements are alongside many and various laws that had already been given. The sermon draws to a close with a kind of liturgy for the bringing of tithes and first fruits (chapter 26).

Finally, chapter 27 gives instructions for an altar to be built on the mountain of cursing, with the curses which are to be both recited by the Levites and written on stones set up on top of the mountain.

Chapter 28 gives the blessings that will follow obedience and a more detailed account of the curses following disobedience. Some of the curses are definitely prophetic.

One significant feature of this discourse is its humanitarian concern: for the poor, the alien, the widow, the fatherless and the disadvantaged generally – even aspects of 'health and safety' are covered (22:8)!

7. Third address (chapters 29-30)

This is the final sermon by Moses, spoken shortly before his death. In it Moses urges the people to accept the renewal of the covenant that God is making with them. Although God had made a covenant with the nation at Mount Sinai, he had preserved them in their desert wanderings and overcome some of the nations on the borders of Canaan. So they now had a responsibility to accept the covenant, to enter into it again. Moses again warns them in a prophetic manner of what will happen if they break the covenant and reminds them that no great undertaking was expected of them other than simple obedience and compliance (30:11-14). As the sermon comes to a close, Moses appeals to the people to choose life (30:19).

This sermon has been recognised as an excellent model for preachers. It is truly Moses at his best.

8. Moses' successor, last words and death (chapters 31-34)

First of all Moses confirms the succession of Joshua as the leader of the people. Special words of promise were given to him to encourage him in the great task that was now to fall on his shoulders. It is interesting to note the part that Moses played in the choice of a successor. It is a good thing today if an experienced pastor can 'train up' a successor (2 Timothy 2:3).

After the formal appointment of Joshua, a copy of the law was placed alongside the Ark of the Covenant. This was the first official copy of the Scriptures and was to be read

to the nation every seven years. In addition, God gave Moses the words of a song, consisting mainly of warnings against turning away from the Lord and his commandments.

Chapter 33 contains the very last words of Moses, which were his prophetic blessings upon all the tribes.

The book ends with an account of the death of Moses. He climbed to a high point of the mountains of Moab overlooking the land of Israel. From there the Lord showed him the land which had been promised to Abraham and his descendants. Because of public disobedience, Moses was not allowed to enter the land but died and was buried on the mountain by God in an unmarked grave. This was most likely to prevent idolatry, which could have arisen if Moses' burial place had been known.

The final words of the book are obviously the work of a subsequent editor, reminding us of the greatness of this servant of God.

SERMON SUGGESTIONS FOR DEUTERONOMY:

1. Moses' First Sermon

- Reminders:
 - Of God's Care
 - Of God's Mighty Acts
 - Of Israel's Rebellion
 - That God is the only true God

- Exhortations to Obedience

This pattern is often adopted by the Apostle Paul in his New Testament letters

2. The Importance of Preaching

- Moses' final responsibility was discharged through his farewell sermons
- The whole nation heard his sermons
- Teaching is central to the sermon
- Application is essential to the sermon

3. The Law and Love

- The Law summarised as love to God and man
- Repetition of the law emphasises its importance
- Obedience a measure of our love to God
- Antinomianism an unbiblical concept

4. The Importance of Remembering Church History

- Moses reviews God's dealings with his people
- Past failures an incentive to present obedience
- God's acts in the past an encouragement to faithfulness in difficult times
- Our unchanging God can act for us today in response to our prayers

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