Cornerstone

SURVEY OF THE OLD TESTAMENT

Vol. 1. Creation to Covenant

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A Cornerstone E-Book

ISBN 978-1-63752-297-4

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PREFACE

This two-volume e-book is based on the study units for the Cornerstone Bible Course *Survey of the Old Testament*. It contains all the material covered in the course units except for the guided extra readings and the study questions and has been formatted to enable it to be read as a normal standalone book.

For those who would like to take the course itself (which is free like all Cornerstone courses), it can be downloaded along with the associated textbooks from the Cornerstone website (CornerstoneCourses.org). All the extra study materials are free and those who complete the course can take a basic online test to receive a certificate of completion without any charge or cost whatsoever.

The material in this book, and the course it is based on, draws on in-depth biblical scholarship, but it is presented in a straightforward manner that is accessible to a wide range of readers. Whether you read this book because you cannot attend formal Bible school or seminary classes, to supplement such study, or to enrich your own personal study and understanding of the Bible, we are confident that you will find the following chapters helpful in gaining a better overview and a deeper understanding of the Old Testament.

1. INTRODUCTION

Although we refer to the Bible as a "book," it is, of course, composed of many individual books of different types – law, history, poetry, prophecy, etc. – gathered into the collections Christians call the Old and New Testaments. Together, these collected books of the Bible have probably had a greater impact on the world than most other books combined – the Bible is truly the "Book of books" in terms of its significance as well as being a book made up of many smaller books. But while all Christians are aware of the Bible's overall importance, many do not spend much time reading and studying the Old Testament (or Hebrew Bible) and do not fully realize just how important it was in the development of the New Testament – and still is for our understanding of the Christian Scriptures.

The thirty-nine books of the Hebrew Bible were, after all, the only Bible possessed and used by Jesus and the earliest Christians. And even when the Christian Scriptures began to come into existence, the Hebrew Bible was foundational to almost everything written in them. The fact is, the Old Testament represents a full seventy-five percent of the overall Bible used by Christians, and the importance of the oldest part of our Bible is qualitative as well as quantitative. We cannot deeply understand the New Testament without knowing the Old (Romans 15:4; etc.). That is one of the primary reasons for this book: to provide a focused survey giving a deeper understanding of key parts of the first three-quarters of the overall Bible.

The material in this book is presented for the most part from a Protestant perspective, but the approach is non-denominational and non-dogmatic. This means that where Christians of different backgrounds view sections of Scripture differently, the major viewpoints are summarized, and an attempt is made to give a fair evaluation of the different views. This approach provides vital background for those wishing to pursue teaching the word of God as well as for our ability as individual Christians to communicate with other believers. This approach also stresses the importance of the underlying message of the biblical accounts over and above individual or sectarian viewpoints about their details.

Many in-depth surveys of the Bible consist of either analytic studies of the individual books of the Old or New Testament, or, alternately, they are synthetic – bringing together scattered scriptures relative to selected themes or doctrines. The problem with these approaches is that on the one

hand, book-by-book studies can usually only give surface treatment to many important topics because of the sheer volume of material they must cover, and on the other hand, narrow thematic and doctrinal studies frequently miss the richness of the context in which the individual scriptures are found.

This book takes a totally different approach by looking closely at key events recorded in the flow of the biblical text. This is actually the way the Bible presents its material to us – in terms of God's actions in the history of the world and within the lives of the people through whom he has worked. When we understand this, we begin to see that the fundamental unit of scriptural understanding is the event rather than a single book of the Bible or an isolated doctrine. Study focused on the whole book of Exodus, for example, is going to miss a great deal of important detail regarding the giving of the Ten Commandments. On the other hand, study of the isolated doctrine of law is going to miss a great deal regarding the setting and significance of the Commandments. It is in the study of biblical events that we see the Bible's message most clearly and completely.

Based on this underlying philosophy, this book looks closely at the most important events recorded in the Old Testament – and the people associated with them. Beginning with creation and ending with the events that were preparatory to the coming of the Messiah in the New Testament era, the book does not cover everything in the Old Testament (an impossible task for two volumes), but it offers an overview of its key events resulting in insights not gained by other methods of study.

This approach helps the reader to learn to focus on the most important aspects of the Old Testament, to learn to analyze them effectively, and to learn additional background information that will help in better understanding the Bible at a much deeper level than reading the text alone can provide. This is not to minimize in any way the value of simply reading the Bible – but to stress that the more relevant knowledge we can bring to our study of the Bible, the more understanding we will gain from it.

2. BACKGROUND

THE BIBLE, HEBREW BIBLE, AND OLD TESTAMENT:

As we begin this book it is important that a few basic terms are clarified as confusion sometimes occurs with even the well-known names: Bible, Hebrew Bible, and Old Testament.

The English word "Bible" comes from the Greek *ta biblia* which means "the books," because, although we tend to think of it as a single book, the Bible is obviously a collection – a small library – composed of sixty-six individual books that were written over a long period of time (about 1,500 years). Confusion only occurs here when the term "Bible" is used by different faith groups with reference to the particular Bible they use – for example, the Jewish use of the term "the Bible" for what Christians call the Old Testament and view as the "first part" of the Bible.

Of course, the Christian terms "Old Testament" and "New Testament" refer to the two collections of books composed by Jewish and Christian writers respectively. Those books that were inspired and written during the Old Testament era – books such as Genesis, Psalms, and Isaiah – were composed between approximately 1400 and 400 BC. Eventually, between about AD 50 to 100, the early Christian Church added new books – such as the Four Gospels and the letters of Paul – to create the collection that Christians refer to as the New Testament.

Often the Old Testament is called the "Hebrew Bible," both because it was produced by Hebrew/Jewish authors and was mainly written in the Hebrew language (with a few sections being written in Aramaic, the language commonly used by the Jewish people in the later stages of the Hebrew Bible's development).

In a similar way, the New Testament books are sometimes called the "Christian Bible," which can be confusing because Christians also accept and use the Hebrew Bible or Old Testament – and may refer to the combined collections as the Christian Bible because that is the Bible accepted by the Christian faith.

Simply speaking, the terms Hebrew Bible and Old Testament refer to the same works, though there are some differences. Some branches of Christianity, such as the Catholic, Anglican, and Orthodox churches, include in their Old Testaments a number of additional later books – often called the Apocrypha or Deuterocanonical books – that are not accepted

by the Jewish faith or by most Protestant Christian churches. This book follows the latter approach in not considering those extra books canonical and so they are not discussed in the following chapters, although that is not an issue as this book focuses on the major events of the Old Testament/Hebrew Bible – all of which are recorded outside the Apocrypha.

ORDER AND ARRANGEMENT OF THE BOOKS:

Although they contain the same books, there is also another difference between the Hebrew Bible and the Old Testament – the order of the books within the respective collections.

Hebrew Bible: In the final form of the Hebrew Bible as it was accepted by the Jewish people, there are three divisions: Law (Hebrew *Torah*), Prophets (Hebrew *Nevi'im*), Writings (Hebrew *Ketubim*). This arrangement gives the acronym *TaNaK* (made from the first letters of each Hebrew word) – another name for the Hebrew Bible.

Old Testament: In the Christian Old Testament the same books are arranged in roughly chronological order in four divisions: Law – History – Poetry & Wisdom Writings – Prophecy.

This different arrangement between the books of the Hebrew Bible and the (same) books in the Old Testament gives a different stress to the collections. The order of the Hebrew Bible means that its last book is 2 Chronicles which ends with King Cyrus of Persia declaring that the exiled Jews who were captive in Babylon could return to Jerusalem (2 Chronicles 36:23). On the other hand, The Old Testament arrangement ends with the prophetic book of Malachi which predicts the return of "Elijah" before the messianic age "day of the Lord" (Malachi 4:5-6). The one arrangement stresses the past history of the Jewish people, while the other stresses prophecies that Christians see as being relative to the future Messiah who would be portrayed in the New Testament. Finally, several books of the Hebrew Bible (Samuel, Kings, Chronicles, Ezra–Nehemiah, and the twelve Minor Prophets) are split into separate books (1 Samuel, 2 Samuel, etc.) in Christian Bibles.

Apart from these differences, the Hebrew Bible and the Old Testament represent the same material, which is why the terms are often used interchangeably – as they are in this book.

HOW THE BIBLE CAME TO US:

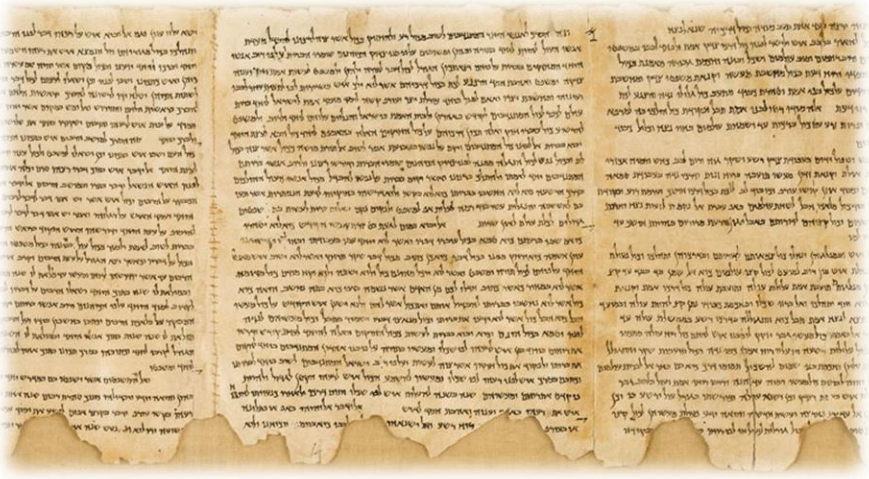
The term transmission refers to the repeated copying and passing down of the text of the Bible through time, while the term preservation is used of very ancient copies that have survived until now. As far as transmission is concerned, although we do not know exactly when many of the books of the Hebrew Bible were first written down, we do know that the original manuscripts were painstakingly copied and recopied over hundreds of years by skilled scholars. These were the "scribes" frequently mentioned in the New Testament (Mark 12:38-40 ESV; etc.) who not only copied the Hebrew Scriptures but also studied them and taught them to people.

In the period A.D. 500-1000 they were followed by the group of scribes called Masoretes (from the Hebrew word *masorah*, meaning "tradition"). The Masoretic scribes used a very meticulous system of copying the text in which each letter of every word was copied – and checked – individually. The Masoretes were careful to count all the paragraphs, words and even letters in the text they were copying, so they could know by counting if their copy was accurate. They even knew the middle letter of each book so they could count forward and back to see if the copy they had made was perfect. This intense dedication to accuracy meant that although we do not have the earliest manuscripts of the Hebrew Bible, the Masoretic texts on which our modern Bibles are largely based are extremely trustworthy.

The earliest biblical books were written on scrolls that had to be rolled and unrolled to read but were eventually copied, as time went by, onto individual sheets of paper (made from plants) or parchment (made from animal skins) and bound into modern style books called *codices* (singular, *codex*). This situation led to the fact that the older scrolls were frequently destroyed as they became worn out over time and only the newer copies were kept. Ironically, this means the oldest complete copy of the Hebrew Bible that survives today is not as old as the oldest copy of the New Testament, although many older individual books and fragments of the Hebrew Bible have survived.

The best known and most significant of the partial biblical books that have been preserved are the famous Dead Sea Scrolls, discovered in 1947 in caves on the western side of the Dead Sea. These scrolls consist of sections of a great many ancient Hebrew documents, including a complete scroll of the book of Isaiah and fragments of some 190 other scrolls dating from as early as the third century BC to around the time of Jesus. Almost every book in the Old Testament was represented, and this biblical material

has proven to be of immense value to our understanding of the transmission of the biblical text. While some of the scroll texts are clearly paraphrases rather than true translations (somewhat like the modern "Living Bible," for example), in most cases the Dead Sea Scroll texts exhibit minimal differences between their wording and that of the Hebrew Masoretic Text produced a thousand years later and used as the basis of our Old Testament today.



Section of the Dead Sea Scrolls' Isaiah Scroll. Image: Imj.org

In addition to the very old biblical fragments that have survived, we also have ancient translations of the Hebrew Bible such as the Greek Septuagint (from the Latin for "seventy" and often abbreviated LXX), which was made in Egypt between 250-150 BC. Because ancient Israel had been absorbed into the Greek empire of Alexander the Great, the Greek language replaced Hebrew for many Jews, and this popular translation was used and quoted by a number of New Testament writers. Once again, although this and other ancient translations exhibit small differences from the Masoretic text, overall they confirm the reliability of the text of the Hebrew Bible as we have it today.

DOCUMENTARY THEORY:

Finally, in this introduction we must briefly discuss the so-called "documentary hypothesis." Secular scholars have long examined works of

ancient literature from the perspective that they may not have been written by the people whose names are attached to them. For example, the great Greek epic poems the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* have traditionally been credited to the poet Homer. But beginning in the early nineteenth century, Classical scholars began to think that differences between the two works suggested they were composed by two – or more – people. This kind of analysis was eventually applied to the Hebrew Bible, and in its developed form the documentary hypothesis suggested that many biblical books were actually made up of numerous earlier "source documents" that had been woven together at an often much later date than traditionally believed and not by the biblical people associated with the books named after them.

Evidence for this theory was believed to be found, for example, in the different names for God that the Hebrew Bible uses at different points. For example, the creation account of the first chapter of Genesis uses the name "Elohim" for God while the second chapter uses the word "Yahweh." This was said to show that the two chapters represented two accounts of creation that were brought together fairly late in history in the form in which we have them now. We will see why this need not be so in the next chapter.

Meanwhile, we can say that although this hypothesis has had a considerable effect on biblical scholarship, scholars today are often less convinced of the idea. The Bible itself is clear that many of its authors utilized different sources in compiling the biblical books. At various points in the Hebrew Bible other books are mentioned that existed in the past and that also described events and people mentioned in the Bible but are not part of the Bible as we have it today. For example, *The Book of the Wars of the Lord* (mentioned in Numbers 21:14-15) and *The Book of Jasher* (mentioned in Joshua 10:13) are not part of the Bible but were clearly regarded as authoritative by the biblical writers. There are more books of this type than many people realize, and the Old Testament books of 1 and 2 Chronicles alone contain dozens of mentions of such texts.

But the fact that the biblical writers utilized many ancient sources in compiling their writings does not mean that the biblical books were written by different people. For example, the book of Genesis mentions some of the sources used in its construction (Genesis 5:1; etc.), but that does not mean that there was no historical Moses who put the sources together (Luke 2:22; etc.). That is why many scholars now feel that while the documentary hypothesis made us more aware of the ancient sources used by some of the biblical writers, it does not prove a later date of writing for those biblical books and this is the position followed in this book.

3. THE CREATION

BACKGROUND AND PERSPECTIVES:

The biblical story of creation is viewed in various ways by Christians of different backgrounds, with a central point at issue being the length of the days of creation described in Genesis 1-2. The three most important approaches to this aspect of the story are the following:

1) Literal – the understanding that everything was made in six 24-hour days exactly as seems to be described in Genesis 1. This understanding was common for many centuries and is still followed by many Christians today. However, there are certain difficulties with this view – such as the fact that Genesis sometimes uses the word "day" for longer periods of time (for example, Genesis 2:4 KJV, ESV, etc.) – that mean we should be willing to consider the merits of other views as well.

2) Developmental – the understanding that God made everything through the process of evolution and that the days described in Genesis 1 really represent long eras of time (the so-called "day-age" view). This relatively recent perspective attempts to mesh what the Bible says with modern scientific theories of the origins of the universe and of life. However, there are many difficulties involved in attempting to align this view with what Genesis tells us – such as how living things could possibly develop in the "age" before the sun and stars.

3) Symbolic – the understanding that the opening chapters of Genesis represent a literary work rather than an historical or scientific treatise because it describes the creation in a way that would be understandable in terms of the beliefs and knowledge of the time in which it was written.

There are some good reasons to favor this last understanding and we will consider them here because they are of considerable importance in understanding the opening section of the Bible. The stories of the first few chapters of Genesis are unique in many ways, but they show undeniable similarities to some of the myths of the cultures that surrounded ancient Israel. Acknowledging this truth does not imply that the first stories of Genesis were copied from the myths of those cultures – in some cases it is equally possible that they reflect independent preservations of the same

underlying ideas or events. Alternately, the accepted ideas of the ancient world could have been adjusted to tell the story of origins from the point of view of creation by one God (monotheism) rather than by many gods (polytheism) as other cultures believed.

Of particular importance to our understanding of Genesis, the creation ideas of ancient Mesopotamia (the area of modern Iraq, to the east of where the biblical narrative is set) were highly influential in the world of the time. Many of these stories were written down long before the biblical account and were doubtless known by the ancient Hebrews who originally had come from Ur in Mesopotamia (Genesis 11:27-31). Significantly, almost all the early stories of Genesis show Mesopotamian connections, as we will see.

For example, the Babylonian creation account *Enuma Elish* tells of the first six generations of gods – with each god being associated with some aspect of the cosmos. The aspects of creation associated with each god parallel the aspects of creation Genesis tells us were made in six days. In the Mesopotamian story, for example, the sixth generation of gods made man so they would not have to work, and the seventh generation was then able to rest. This suggests to many biblical scholars that the Genesis account may be a retelling of older Mesopotamian ideas from the perspective of the Hebrews – in which the things worshipped as gods by the Mesopotamians were physical and made by God.

Ultimately one cannot "prove" or "disprove" any of these three (or other) viewpoints of the Genesis story to everyone's satisfaction, but it is important to remember that the creation account needed to be written in a way that could be understood by people at any point in history, and it is primarily intended to teach us lessons about God and the role of humanity in creation. The message of the account is that God exists, that he made everything, and that he made humans to become like him. Seeing that message clearly, as we should, helps us to understand the rest of the Bible in proper focus and is far more important than any individual idea of how the creation story aligns with our own personal understanding of the mechanics of world origins.

UNDERSTANDING THE TEXT:

Genesis 1 and 2 contain two separate accounts of the creation. Genesis 1:1-2:3 gives a generalized view of the story (rather like a photograph taken through a wide-angle lens) and Genesis 2:4-25 gives a more closely focused account like a photograph of the same scene taken through a close-up lens.

Many scholars think that they represent different stories coming from different sources (the documentary hypothesis mentioned in lesson one), but a number of the creation narratives of the ancient Near East followed the same pattern of introducing their story in a general way, then retelling it with different details.

As the Genesis creation story unfolds, we find the earth and its creatures, humans, and key social and religious institutions described as being created in six days. With a clear logical structure not found in most ancient origin stories, in Genesis the first three days of creation describe God creating *realms of habitation*, while the second three days describe him creating the *inhabitants of those realms*.

Various theories have been proposed which suggest that there is a gap – perhaps of millions of years – between the first two verses of Genesis 1. According to one of these ideas, the world was created but was "formless and empty" for a long period of time as it developed through geological processes.

A common argument for this view is that the word "created" (Hebrew *bara*) used in Genesis 1:1 is different from the normal word for "made" used in the Old Testament and implies God originally created the world and then much later "made" living things. But this argument overlooks the fact that the creation account also uses *bara* in Genesis 1:21 and 1:27 to describe the creation of the sea creatures and birds on the fifth day and of man and woman on the sixth day.

Alternately, it is sometimes said that the earth *became* formless and empty (the Hebrew word *hayah* translated "was" in "the earth was formless and empty" can also mean "became") because of a great destruction resulting from the rebellion of Satan and some of the angels (based on one understanding of scriptures such as Isaiah 14:12–14).

According to this view, what is recorded in the rest of Genesis 1 is the recreation of the earth's surface. But there are many linguistic, logical, and biblical problems with this view, and it goes against the plain meaning of scriptures such as Exodus 20:11 which states that "In six days the Lord made the heavens and the earth, the sea, and all that is in them."

We can learn an important principle from these theories: that it is better not to attempt to introduce ideas into the biblical text that are not clearly stated there. Ultimately, it is simpler, and better handling of the Scriptures, to accept biblical stories as they are rather than trying to force our own speculations into what the Bible says.

KEY THEOLOGICAL CONCEPTS:

While the creation stories of other cultures of the ancient world contained detailed descriptions of how their gods and goddesses came into existence, Genesis is unique in describing only *one God* – the concept of monotheism that has had immeasurable influence on the intellectual and moral development of the world. The word used in Genesis 1 for "God" (Hebrew *Elohim*) is a uni-plural noun (like fish) that can be singular or plural. *Elohim* is used of God and sometimes of angels, judges, and false gods. But when *Elohim* is used of God, it is used with singular verbs, showing that only one God is being discussed.

Similarly, although in Genesis 1:26 God says "Let us make mankind in our image," this verse may simply mean that God was speaking to an audience of angelic or spiritual beings, or – from a Christian perspective – God the Father may have been speaking with the preincarnate God the Son who made all things (John 1:1-3). In any event, the unique monotheism of the Genesis creation account is clear and continually affirmed as Genesis progresses.

The creation story is also unique in that it is silent regarding God's origins. Genesis clearly implies that God has no origins and exists *outside of time*. Genesis also shows that God exists *outside of nature* rather than being a part of it (which is why the existence of God cannot be scientifically proven, because science can only examine and "verify" that which is within nature). Genesis also shows that God *created from nothing* rather than making everything from preexisting material, as in all other known ancient creation accounts.

God's first recorded words in the Scriptures are "Let there be light" and the precedence of light before all other created things is entirely unique to the Hebrew Bible, although many people find these words puzzling because light is mentioned as being created on the first day, while the sun, moon, and stars are said to not have been created until the fourth day. There are a number of plausible answers to this apparent difficulty – such as the possibility the Genesis account intends us to understand that the heavenly bodies were created when God made light appear (Genesis 1:1, 3), but they were not assigned their calendric purposes as markers of days and seasons until the fourth day of creation (Genesis 1:14-18), or that the sun, moon, and stars were created in verse 1 but were not visible from the surface of the earth until God cleared the cloud-filled skies in verse 14 – as discussed above. However, the various reasonings of this type all have weaknesses,

and it is perhaps simply the case that the light appearing on the first day is intended to refer to light from God, just as the New Testament tells us that in the future heavenly city there will be no sun, but God himself will be its light (Revelation 21:23; 22:5).

Whatever the best explanation of this situation may be, there are two important results that proceed from the way the biblical creation story discusses light. First, Genesis makes it clear that the sun, moon, and stars are *not deities* as most of the ancient world believed, but that they are physical things created by God. This introduces a powerful statement against polytheism into the biblical story and an equally powerful elevation of the One True God. Second, the direct association of light with God is a *theological statement* developed throughout the Bible and one that tells us a great deal about the nature of God. The creation narrative would be vastly different if the origin of "light" had not been mentioned at the outset.

Sunrise over the earth. Image: paulpaladin

There are other unique aspects of Genesis 1 and 2 regarding the origins of aspects of biblical religion – such as the first commandment (for humans to have children), the first religious institution (that of the Sabbath rest from work), and the first use of the concept of "holiness" which is found in Genesis 2:3 (also in regard to the Sabbath day). All these concepts are implicit in the very opening chapters of the Hebrew Scriptures and are unique among the religious concepts of the ancient world.

A final important point is that Genesis 2:4 introduces a second name for God: *Yahweh* (see Note 1). The two names of God introduced in the creation story – Elohim and Yahweh – figure heavily in the documentary hypothesis, but there are many possible reasons for their use in Genesis as we will see as we progress through this book. Essentially, Elohim stresses the "transcendent" aspects of God's nature outside of time and space (such as his eternal existence), and Yahweh stresses his "immanent" aspects within the world we know (such as his merciful kindness). The fact that both names are used together in a number of instances in the first chapters of Genesis, but rarely again in the rest of the Bible, shows the importance the creation stories placed on showing both sides of God's nature.

* Note 1: In the Hebrew Bible this name is simply written with the four consonants YHVH. It is often pronounced "Yahweh" or "Yahveh" (and by some "Jehovah"), though it is not known exactly how it was originally pronounced. In English Bibles this name is usually translated "LORD" in all capital letters.

4. THE FALL

BACKGROUND AND PERSPECTIVES:

Like the story of creation, the narrative of the first humans and their first sin (often called "the fall") is a complex one that different Christians view in various ways. Some regard the story as representing the literal first man and woman. Others, taking an evolutionary perspective, see Adam and Eve as representing the first "fully human" individuals in the history of our species. Yet others take a symbolic view, pointing out, for example, that in Genesis 2:17 man is told that "in the day" he ate from the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil he would die, but Genesis 5:5 tells us Adam lived 930 years. If we take both these verses literally, they obviously contradict each other, so proponents of this view feel it is likely that the story of the fall might be at least partly symbolic in the way that it is told.

We will look closely at the symbolic viewpoint, as it is the one least understood by most people but one that a great many scholars of the Bible accept as most likely – especially because the story of Adam and Eve seems to contain a number of ties to ancient Mesopotamia. For example, the name "Eden" itself may be related to the Mesopotamian word (*Edin*) for the area of Mesopotamia /modern Iraq, and Genesis 2:8 says Eden was located "in the East" of ancient Israel – the area of Mesopotamia.

More specifically, the story of the first sin bears some striking resemblances to much older Mesopotamian stories such as that of Adapa, whose name is similar to the Hebrew name for Adam – Adama. Although a great many details of the stories are different, both Adapa and Adam do something which is regarded as a sin against the gods/God. A Mesopotamian god, Ea, secretly intervenes so that Adapa is able to acquire knowledge about heaven and earth, just as the serpent intrudes into the biblical story so that Adam acquires knowledge about good and evil. Both Adapa and Adam are tested regarding something to eat. If Adapa had accepted the food and drink he was offered, he would have become immortal like the gods. The biblical story likewise tells us of the Tree of Life which was available to Adam, but of which he did not partake. When Adapa declines the food of life, he is driven back from heaven to earth – just as Adam's sin leads him to be driven out of Paradise into the world.

In another ancient Mesopotamian story, the god Enki ate plants created by a goddess, so she cursed him and parts of his body became diseased. When Enki became direly ill, the other gods persuaded the offended goddess to help him, and so she created minor healing goddesses to heal the stricken parts of his body. The goddess who healed Enki's rib was Ninti, whose name means "lady of the rib" or "lady of life" – evoking the story of Eve whose name means "life" and who was created from the rib of Adam, as well as the role of the forbidden plant in the biblical Eden. In the *Epic of Gilgamesh* the character Enkidu is created in the area of Edin and at first lives in harmony with the animals. But after making love with a woman, he is rejected by the wild animals and has to leave the Edin area.

Similarities such as these indicate the possibility that some aspects of the biblical story of humanity's first sin could have been recast from commonly known Mesopotamian stories which were retold from a monotheistic perspective. But whichever of the various viewpoints of the origin of the story of the "fall" may make the most sense to us personally, as with our response to the biblical creation account, it is imperative that we do not become fixated on or polarized over our views of the story. We must look beneath the narrative to find its message – which is one that all Christians can share and appreciate.

UNDERSTANDING THE TEXT:

When we are introduced to the first man and woman, the man is said to be a "man" (Hebrew *ish*). He is called Adam, a name often said to be from the Hebrew word *adamah* meaning "earth" because he was made from the earth, but the name is perhaps more likely from the Mesopotamian word *adamu* meaning "to make." The woman is not named at first – she is simply called "woman" (Hebrew *isha*) because she is "from man," though this is probably a kind of literary pun (just as the English words male and female are not really from the same word though they sound the same). The woman was apparently only later named Eve (after she had children), as her name is said to mean "mother of all living" (Genesis 3:20).

It is the woman who actually plays the central role in the narrative of the fall. The text does not tell us whether her understanding of the prohibition against eating from the forbidden tree came directly from God or was relayed to her by Adam, but when the serpent asks her about the prohibition, it is interesting that she both adds to and takes away from what God actually said.

Image: Rossella Apostoli

She added that they were not to touch the forbidden tree, and her words also subtly subtracted from the penalty, saying God had said "you will die" (Genesis 3:3), rather than the much more forceful expression (in Hebrew) used by God that "you will *certainly* die" (Genesis 2:17).

In the same way the serpent both adds and subtracts from the truth by demeaning God and elevating humans. He does this by intimating God did not want humans to have the knowledge he possessed, and that humans were capable of thinking for themselves in such matters and could make their own moral decisions.

Genesis next tells us what occurred when the "Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil" became the focus of Eve's attention: "When the woman saw that the fruit of the tree was good for food and pleasing to the eye, and also desirable for gaining wisdom, she took some and ate it" (Genesis 3:6). The temptation appears to have been threefold: at the sensory level ("good for food"), the aesthetic level ("pleasing to the eye"), and the cognitive level ("for gaining wisdom"). But if we analyze the account more closely, we also see a clear pattern regarding the development of sin (one that, for the purposes of easy memorization, can be described by the analogy of a growing tree):

Seed: Exposure to temptation – "the woman saw"
Roots: Considering the temptation – "the tree was good for food and pleasing to the eye"

Trunk: Intellectual acquiescence – "and also desirable for gaining wisdom"
Branches: Submission to sin – "she took some and ate it"
Fruit: The eventual result of sin – "when you eat from it you will certainly die."

The apostle James describes the genealogy of temptation leading to transgression in the same way (James 1:14-15):

Seed: Exposure to temptation – "each person is tempted"
Roots: Considering the temptation – "dragged away by their own evil desire"
Trunk: Intellectual acquiescence – "and enticed"
Branches: Submission to sin – "then, after desire has conceived, it gives birth to sin"
Fruit: The eventual result of sin – "sin … gives birth to death."

Although the woman certainly played a central part in the first sin, the Bible places the blame mainly upon Adam. This is for two reasons. First, Adam was given the headship of the family and did not properly exercise it in guiding the woman in this situation, allowing himself to be wrongfully influenced. Second, the apostle Paul wrote that "Adam was not the one deceived; it was the woman who was deceived and became a sinner" (1 Timothy 2:14). Eve was deceived, but the story suggests Adam knew what he was doing when he took and ate the forbidden fruit. Both the man and the woman sinned, but Adam's sin was more serious as being disobedient is worse than being deceived.

After their first sin, when God approached the man and woman, his question "Where are you?" does not reflect on his omniscience – he knew where they were, of course – but the question was really an opportunity for them to come to him and confess what they had done. Instead, the couple showed a very different attitude in reacting with shame (resulting in concealment), fear (resulting in trying to hide from God), and guilt (resulting in their attempts to shift the blame for what they had done (Genesis 3:12-13). While the woman blamed the serpent ("the serpent deceived me"), Adam blamed both the woman and God ("the woman … you gave me"), indicating an even more desperate attempt to deny responsibility for his actions.

God's judgment on the serpent and the human race is the Bible's first prophecy and a crucial part of the story. In each case the punishment meted

out reflects in some way the nature of the sin committed. God declares that because of the serpent's role in bringing sin into the world – and thus bringing destruction on humanity – the serpent would be destroyed by a member of the human race: the woman's "Seed" or offspring (Genesis 3:14-15). This "Seed" or future descendant is called "he" and is a singular noun – which Christians believe is a reference to Jesus Christ – the "Last Adam" (1 Corinthians 15:45), who would eventually destroy the serpent Satan (Revelation 12:9).

The judgment on the woman (Genesis 3:16) indicates she would experience both pain in her role as a mother (pain in childbirth) and as a wife (conflict with her husband). The expression "Your desire shall be for your husband" does not refer to physical desire, but to potential marital struggle (the same Hebrew expression is used of Cain's struggle with sin in Genesis 4:7).

The judgment on the man (Genesis 3:17-19) reflects the fact that he ate what he should not have eaten (and by inference that he rejected the food he was freely offered), so Adam would now struggle to eat and his labor to produce food would be burdensome. In a final ironic turn on Adam's attempt to become God-like, the man is reminded that he was made from the earth and to the earth he would return.

KEY THEOLOGICAL CONCEPTS:

The story of the fall contained in Genesis 2 and 3 teaches us a great deal about God. These chapters show him, for example, not only as a God of creativity, but also of generosity and love in what he was willing to share with humans, his desire for humans to be productive and to find satisfaction in work, his protective nature and his desire to walk with his created children. They also show his sense of justice, that he will not allow disobedience to go unpunished, and his patience in dealing with humans even when they have sinned. The account also makes an important point in showing that only the revelation of God – God's word – regarding right and wrong can be fully trusted. Human thought and rationalization about morality cannot ultimately be trusted as it is often based not on what is objectively *right*, but what people *want*.

These chapters also teach us a great deal about sin. The fall story shows the personification of evil in the form of the serpent and underscores, for example, the truth that all sin is based on a lie of some kind, that sin separates us from God, that it changes our attitudes and destroys our

happiness, and that regret alone does not erase the penalty of sin. The story is also of the greatest importance in teaching the concept of "Free Moral Agency" – that humans are not ruled by instinct like animals but have free will and can make their own choices between good and evil. Yet the responsibility of this freedom also means that humans are accountable for their own actions.

There are important ramifications to this view – that despite the claims of modern social science, we cannot blame sin on our childhood experiences or environment. The first man and woman experienced no childhood traumas and were not held back by their environment in any way, yet the story shows that even under perfect conditions humans can and will sin if they so choose.

Just as the story of the fall ends on a predictive note of human suffering, the account also shows that suffering is a result of human failure and sin, not because it was God's will. In fact, another aspect of the theology of the fall story is the idea that the original sin committed by Adam and Eve not only directly affected them, but also affected all humanity. This doctrine of "original sin" maintains that human nature was corrupted due to the first sin and, as a result, all humans are born inherently sinful. The idea is not explicitly laid out in the Bible but was developed over the centuries (based on interpretation of scriptures such as Romans 5:12) and is held by many, but not all, Christians.

Finally, Genesis 2-3 also stress important aspects of human interaction – for example, the importance of the marriage relationship and its potential blessings. But the fall story also shows us negative aspects of human interaction such as the desire or willingness to please others that can be extremely destructive if not guided properly, and that we cannot escape the penalty of disobedience by blaming others for what we do. A psychologist once said "Human beings need four things: air, food, drink, and someone to blame" – which aptly summarizes this simple yet profound aspect of the fall narrative.

5. THE FLOOD

BACKGROUND AND PERSPECTIVES:

The biblical story of the flood is one of the most striking and well-known of all the stories of Genesis and of the whole Bible. As with the stories of creation and the fall, when we look at the Genesis flood story we find the same three possible interpretations:

1) Literal – that a great flood occurred exactly as Genesis affirms and that this flood was worldwide – covering the tops of the highest mountains (Genesis 7:20) and destroying all human life except for the man Noah and his family (Genesis 6:7–13). This view does not seem to fit the geological or archaeological records as we understand them (there are no flood deposits over most of the earth's surface), but does seem to have the support of the words of Jesus who apparently spoke of the flood as being worldwide (Luke 17:26–35). However, careful reading of Jesus' words shows that he compared the flood that "destroyed them all" (vs. 27) with the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah that "destroyed them all" (vs. 29) and the time of his return when "one will be taken and the other left" (vs. 35). This seems to be the point he was making – that in all three cases the good were saved but those who were not righteous were destroyed or left. So, of itself, Luke 17:26–35 does not necessarily teach a worldwide destruction, just that all the wicked involved were destroyed. Another detail to keep in mind is that the Hebrew expression "all the earth" is sometimes used in the Bible in a purely intensive (that is, meant to emphasize) rather than extensive (meaning all-inclusive) way – as when the area of the plain of Sodom and Gomorrah is called "all the earth" (Genesis 19:28), and the famine in Egypt is said to be over "all the earth" (Genesis 41:57). There are similar reasons why expressions such as the waters covered the "high mountains" do not necessarily mean what we might assume they mean.

2) Developmental – the understanding that the biblical flood story is a summary of numerous destructive but local floods that occurred over time in the ancient Near East and especially in the area of the Tigris and Euphrates Rivers of Mesopotamia. This view has the support of the fact that archaeology has discovered large flood deposits in this area that are not

universal and that date to different times in history. However, many details of the Genesis story do not make sense if the flood were local – for example, why would Noah have to take all species of land animals on board a ship to save them?

3) Symbolic – the understanding that the biblical flood story may be a literary one that explains God's judgment on large numbers of people who will not turn to him. This possibility that the flood story is a kind of literary parable may be supported by parallel stories from the ancient Near East – some of them known to have been written down many centuries before the biblical account was produced.

Three ancient Mesopotamian stories in particular make reference to a great flood, the epics of *Ziusudra*, *Atrahasis*, and *Gilgamesh*. In the first, Ziusudra hears the gods' decision to destroy humanity and constructs a vessel which delivers him from the flood brought on by the gods. In the Atrahasis epic, the gods become upset that humans are making too much noise. As a result, they take various measures to destroy humans, the last of which is to bring a great flood upon the earth. The only person to survive is Atrahasis, who takes his family into a ship, closes the door behind them, and remains there until the flood subsides and the birds he sends out do not return.

Even more detailed parallels with the biblical account appear in the Epic of Gilgamesh, in which the hero meets a couple who survived the flood. The man, Utnapishtim, tells a story of the flood very similar to that of Genesis. Utnapishtim was warned by the god Enki and told to prepare a ship into which he takes every kind of animal. The flood comes from heavy rain and because the "windows of heaven" are opened. Eventually the ship comes to rest on top of a mountain (see Note 1 below) and at this point Utnapishtim sends out a dove, a swallow, and a raven – almost exactly the same species as mentioned in Genesis.

After the flood, Utnapishtim offers sacrifice and the goddess Ishtar lifts her curved jeweled necklace above her head in the shape of the rainbow's arc as a sign of remembrance of the flood (in Mesopotamia, the rainbow was called "the jewels of heaven"). In the Mesopotamian Sumerian king list, the kings living before the flood are said to have had extremely long lifespans which shorten dramatically after the flood occurs – just as with the great ages of the pre-flood patriarchs in the Hebrew Bible.

The similarities of these and other Mesopotamian stories with the biblical account are far more than could be coincidental. However, whatever our own views are regarding the different interpretations of the flood story, once again the exact nature of the flood is not as important as the intent of the Genesis account to communicate a message about God and his relationship with humanity.

"And the waters were upon the earth" Image: Michael Rosskothen

UNDERSTANDING THE TEXT:

When we consider the Genesis flood story, the first thing we must realize is that the account is one of *un*creation. The world which was first created out of a primeval watery chaos (Genesis 1:2) is now returned to the watery chaos out of which it came. For example, while Genesis 1:6-9 describes the separation of the waters above the earth from the earth, and the separation of the lower waters and the earth, these acts of creation are repeated – in reverse order – in the uncreation described in the flood story (Genesis 7:11).

There is a reason for this underlying structure of the biblical story. The reversal of creation is accomplished because God removes the restraints placed on the natural world – just as Genesis chapter 6 shows us that humans had cast off all moral, ethical, and religious restraints. In other words, the story is constructed to show that the punishment fit the crimes of sinful humanity.

In fact, this perspective on the flood is specifically stated by the biblical text which uses forms of exactly the same Hebrew verb, *hihsit* "to destroy," to describe both man's destruction of the created realm in Genesis 6:11 (often translated along the lines of "Now the earth was *corrupt* in God's

sight") and God's resulting destruction of mankind in Genesis 6:13 (often translated "Behold, I will *destroy* them with the earth").

What God announced he would destroy was essentially the out of control destruction by humans – the punishment could not fit the crime more closely. This fact must be stressed because in the cultures surrounding ancient Israel there was no such concept – legal punishments were usually dependent on things such as the social class of the person/s affected by the crime.

When we turn from the theme of the flood story to the way in which it is presented in Genesis, we find some remarkable aspects to the narrative. The flood story is clearly very carefully constructed in terms of its literary structure. The story is told in two equal halves – the flood's rising (Genesis 7:17-24) and falling (Genesis 8:6-12), with the events of each half of the story being mirrored in the other half.

For example, in the first half of the story Noah is said to be the father of Shem, Ham, and Japheth (Genesis 5:32) and this fact is repeated in the second half (Genesis 9:18).

In the same way, God makes a covenant with Noah in the first half of the account (Genesis 6:18) and in the second half (Genesis 9:8). The flood waters rise for 150 days (Genesis 7:24) and fall for 150 days (Genesis 8:3). Noah waited seven days in the Ark for the flood to begin (Genesis 7:10), and he waited seven days in the ark to send out a bird (Genesis 8:10), and so on. A dozen or so elements of the story are repeated or reflected in the story's two halves in this way.

The clear mirroring of the story's two halves goes far beyond the possibility of coincidence and shows that, contrary to the documentary hypothesis approach (see Chapter 2) which sees the story as being a fusion of different accounts, the Genesis flood narrative represents a carefully constructed single story.

The events said to have occurred at the end of the flood in Genesis 8 also mirror the creation events of Genesis 1 and 2 – in effect painting a picture of *re-creation* after the "uncreation" of the flood. Just as the Spirit (literally "wind") from God was said to be over the earth and waters on the first day of the original creation (Genesis 1:2), so God sent a wind over the earth and waters after the flood (Genesis 8:1), etc. The following table lays out the similarities of the second half of the flood story (after the rains) with each of the seven days of the original creation:

CREATION ACCOUNT	EVENT	FLOOD ACCOUNT
1:2	A wind from God moves over the earth and waters	8:1
1:6-7	The waters are moved to make an area of habitation	8:1-5
1:9-12	The dry ground and plant life appear	8:5-12
1:14-19	Light appears (Noah opens the Ark to the light and sees the world)	8:13
1:20-23	Animals and birds appear	8:15-19
1:24-31	Humans appear, God blesses them and says "be fruitful and multiply"	8:18-9:7
2:1-3	A sign given regarding God's cessation of activity	9:8-17

Table showing correspondences between the creation story of Genesis 1-2 and the re-creation of Genesis 8-9.

Notice that the similarities between the key events of creation and post-flood re-creation are not general, but are highly specific and follow *exactly* the same order. When we put all this information together, it is clear how carefully crafted the biblical flood story is – with the first half of the account describing the un-creation of the world and the second half describing the world's re-creation.

This symmetrical literary structure of the flood narrative not only argues against the documentary hypothesis view of the story, but also ties into the overall literary structure of the early Genesis stories. Each narrative section of the book of Genesis begins (or ends) with the Hebrew term *toledot* which literally means "bringing forth" (Genesis 2:4; 5:1; 6:9; etc.) and emphasizes the progressive nature of an ongoing story of creation rather than a patchwork of similar accounts.

We tend to think of the end of the flood account as the story's happy ending – the rainbow and the repopulation of the earth – but Genesis 9:20 tells us that "Noah, a man of the soil, proceeded to plant a vineyard. When he drank some of its wine, he became drunk and lay uncovered inside his tent." Scholars have pointed to possible issues that may be reflected in this verse. Why would Noah immediately plant a vineyard as opposed to more basic crops? Why did righteous Noah become drunk but no one else? These details almost seem to suggest what we would call a Post-Traumatic Stress

Disorder situation. If this was intended in the account, it is an extremely discerning one far advanced beyond its ancient parallels.

KEY THEOLOGICAL CONCEPTS:

Despite the similarity of the Mesopotamian and biblical stories of the flood at many points, the *theology* of the Genesis account is vastly different from that of the older stories. For example, while other stories concerned themselves only with the fate of their own nations or peoples, the biblical story shows God is concerned with the whole world – possibly a reason for the "worldwide" nature of the Genesis flood story. There are many other important differences regarding God and the pagan gods. While in the Atrahasis epic the gods become upset that humans are making too much noise, the Genesis story tells us that God only brought about the great flood because of the increase in human wickedness.

It is interesting that the wickedness described in Genesis 6 is not viewed from the perspective of religion – as a matter of idolatry or other religious sins against God – but purely as a matter of moral misdeeds aimed at humans – with the violence that had begun with Cain and Lamech (Genesis 4) and had escalated to worldwide proportions. The Genesis account conveys that once this kind of evil had become widespread enough, from God's perspective there was no longer any purpose to human existence.

In the myths of other ancient Near Eastern cultures, the flood is characterized as simply an extreme example of the most common natural catastrophe of which they were aware, and the real interest for the ancient hearer of the story is the luck or perhaps resourcefulness of those who survive. In the Hebrew flood story, on the other hand, the uniqueness of the scale of the flood is paralleled by the scale of wickedness portrayed. This makes it all the more striking that the biblical flood story also differs from other early parallels by stressing God's sorrow at having to punish his created children (Genesis 6:6). While other stories speak of the anger of the gods against humanity, there is no hint of their sorrow.

Critics of the Bible often speak of the "vengeful" nature of a God who would bring a flood on the world. But the biblical flood story makes it clear that God warned humans through Noah, "a preacher of righteousness" (2 Peter 2:5), over a long period of time (Genesis 6:3), before exacting the punishment he had threatened. Only if the story had said God brought the flood without warning could God's action be said to have been a vengeful one. Rather than showing a harsh, vengeful God, the flood account

emphasizes the patience, love, and mercy of God as much as his justice and righteousness.

The Genesis flood story also ends in a very different theological way from earlier stories. After the flood humans continue in their wicked ways, but God has bound himself to utilize an alternative solution to this problem (Genesis 9:12-16) – a covenant that displays his love and desire to help humanity and one that is remarkable in that it is binding only one way – on himself – not to destroy humanity. Ultimately, the Genesis flood story is about the salvation of those who walk with God as much as it is about the punishment of the wicked. In the New Testament, the apostle Peter uses the story as an analogy of baptism (1 Peter 3:18-22); although what he explains is a New Testament concept, the analogy stresses the aspect of salvation (vs. 20) that forms an underlying basis of the Genesis story.

*Note 1: Sensational claims are sometimes made regarding the finding of remains of Noah's ark, but it is not entirely sure which mountain the biblical "Ararat" is intended to represent (the Bible mentions the mountain range rather than a specific mountain), though searchers have concentrated on the peak called Agri Dagh (17,000 feet) in what is now eastern Turkey. Fragments of ancient wood from this area claimed to be from the ark have been carbon-14 dated and shown to be no older than the fifth century A.D. As Christians, we should be wary of embracing or spreading unfounded stories supposedly "proving" the Biblical flood, and it is doubtless better to concentrate instead on the message of the story – that God is both just and merciful.

6. BABEL AND THE NATIONS

BACKGROUND AND PERSPECTIVES:

The story of Babel (Genesis 11) and the "Table of Nations" that precedes it (Genesis 10) form a transition between the accounts of worldwide and miraculous events – such as the creation and the flood – that seem to be described in a literary manner, and the localized and everyday events – seemingly described in a literal manner – that follow in the record of Abraham and his descendants through the rest of the Old Testament.

Not surprisingly, the relationship between the Genesis accounts and those of ancient Mesopotamia (modern day Iraq and the surrounding areas) continues through this transitional period because the setting of much of Genesis 10-11 is Mesopotamia itself. But despite the obvious Mesopotamian influence on the Babel narrative, the wider biblical story found in this section is unique. In Genesis 10 the divisions of most of humankind are mapped out in the Table of Nations which lists a total of 70 people groups or their individual founders. This number was symbolic of the concept of "totality," as is seen in many places in the Old Testament (Exodus 24: 9; etc.) and in the New (Matthew 18:22; etc).

Nothing comparable to the biblical Table of Nations is known from the whole ancient world. While the genealogical lists of other civilizations concern themselves with the people of their own cultures, the Genesis list represents all nations as being important. This outward focus of Genesis 10 is heightened by the fact that Israel itself is not included in the Table of Nations. The list is, in fact, unprecedented in its apparent desire to give an overview of human cultures.

Yet the list is somewhat selective in the sense that it concentrates to some extent on the genealogy of the peoples with whom the nation of Israel would eventually interact. The descendants of Noah's son Japheth are said to be spread from east to west across the north (corresponding roughly with the area of Eurasia); those of Ham lie to the south and west (corresponding mainly with Egypt and the Canaanite area); and the descendants of Shem are shown to be situated to the east and south (corresponding with Arabia and other areas of the Near East). It is important to stress that the list says nothing about racial divisions or differences and focuses instead on family and national relationships.

The story of the Tower of Babel is deeply rooted in the religious culture of ancient Mesopotamia. A number of Mesopotamian cities constructed

large temple towers called ziggurats (see Note 1 below) that were not only raised platforms for the offering of sacrifices to the gods, but also functioned mythologically as stairways to heaven – or more precisely stairways *from* heaven. The towers were not meant to allow humans access to the heavens, but to allow the gods to use them to *come down to earth* to bless the people for their sacrifices. Mesopotamian kings left records extolling themselves for constructing such towers of baked brick (Genesis 11:3), and they were causes of individual and community pride.

Probably the best known of these Mesopotamian temple towers is the ziggurat of Ur – an ancient city about 190 miles (310 km) south of modern Baghdad in southern Iraq. The structure was built during the Early Bronze Age (twenty-first century BC or older). This tower originally measured 210 ft. (64 m.) in length, 148 ft. (45 m.) in width, and about 100 ft. (30 m.) in height. Although not the tallest ziggurat built, even this ten-story structure would certainly have seemed to reach into the heavens by ancient standards.

Artist's reconstruction of the ziggurat of Ur. Image: Mozaik

In the Genesis description of the Babel event we read that the people desired to build a city with such a tower "that reaches to the heavens" (Genesis 11:4). The Hebrew is literally a tower with "head in the heavens," and it is interesting that ancient clay tablets have been found in Mesopotamia that preserve a tradition of problems associated with such building. A text known as *Shumma Alu* ("If a city …") announces impending doom would come on any city or tower built with its "head in

the heavens," and states that any city built in this manner would be abandoned and become a ruin.

Mesopotamian texts also speak of a time when humanity spoke a single language. The story is preserved in the epic called *Enmerkar and the Lord of Aratta*. This literary work speaks of a time when there were no wild beasts and people lived in harmony. The story also asserts that "The whole universe in unison spoke to [the god] Enlil in one language," then human speech was changed and "contention" resulted. Although there is no mention of the building of a tower in the Enmerkar text, the theme of divine confusion of language is clearly described.

UNDERSTANDING THE TEXT:

The Table of Nations found in Genesis 10 is an important turning point in the Old Testament. Just as the earlier chapters of Genesis showed the descent of all peoples from Adam, Genesis 10 stresses the descent of all people from Noah following the re-creation after the flood. The Table also includes a number of interesting details. Beginning at Genesis 10:2, listed in order of increasing importance due to proximity from ancient Israel's perspective, are the descendants of Japheth, then Ham, then Shem.

Japheth's descendants include several people-names that are historically recognizable such as Elisha – which has been linked to Cyprus in the Mediterranean – and others the Genesis account refers to as "the maritime peoples" (Genesis 10:5). The line of Ham's descendants includes both Egypt and the Canaanites – both cultures being important in later Israelite history – and the description of the line of Shem is important for the biblical story, as he is said to have been the ancestor of Eber (v. 21), the name from which the word "Hebrew" originates. This line led eventually to Abraham who, as we will see, became the father of the Hebrew people. The list provides clear indication that the roots of the Israelites (despite their later coming out of Egypt) were in Mesopotamia.

Of some interest in the Table of Nations is the discussion of Nimrod – the only individual singled out for comment in the whole list. According to Jewish and Christian tradition, Nimrod was the leader of those who built the Tower of Babel. These later traditions also established Nimrod's reputation as being a great rebel against God. For example, the first-century Jewish writer Philo interpreted the biblical statement that Nimrod was "a mighty hunter before the Lord" (literally "in the face of Yahweh") to mean "in opposition to the Lord." Comments such as this have led some

Christian groups to build up a considerable mythology around the figure of Nimrod that asserts he was the founder of false religion and other evils that have continued to the present day. However, this is an example of reading things into the text that the Bible simply does not say. That Nimrod was somehow important in his own age is clear from the length of the comment regarding him and the cities he founded and the fact that the Bible uses the expression "land of Nimrod" as a synonym for Mesopotamia as late as the book of Micah (Micah 5:6).

Following the Table of Nations, the Genesis account then focuses on one particular city on the Mesopotamian plain and the story of the tower built there, and God's subsequent confusion of the peoples' one language into many different ones. The people are reported to have said "Come, let us build ourselves a city, with a tower that reaches to the heavens, so that we may make a name for ourselves; otherwise we will be scattered over the face of the whole earth" (Genesis 11:4).

There seem to have been two problems with what the people purposed to do. First, their desire to "make a name" for themselves seems to have been an attitude of pride. Soon after these events God promised Abraham that he would make his name great (Genesis 12:2), so the problem was evidently not one of having a great name or reputation, but of desiring it for selfish and self-aggrandizing reasons.

But the people's desire not to "be scattered" was obviously a clear rebellion against God's command to spread out and inhabit the earth (Genesis 9:1). Genesis tells us twice that as a result of their unwillingness to spread out into the world and their desire to congregate in one central area, God decided to "come down" to see the city (Genesis 11:5, 7) – a clear irony that ancient readers would have understood since the intended purpose of the Mesopotamian ziggurat towers was, as we have seen, for the gods to come down to earth (see Note 2 below). Also ironically, the punishment of the builders of the tower who desired to make a great name for themselves was that they were recorded in Scripture with a name of infamy ("Babel" sounds like the Hebrew word for "confused") rather than one of glory (Genesis 11:9).

KEY THEOLOGICAL CONCEPTS:

A striking aspect of the Genesis Table of Nations is that while the lists of other cultures usually focused only on their kings and leaders, the Genesis list encompasses all who were in the line of human descent. All people –

both individually and as groups – are depicted as being worthy of record. Importantly, the list of nations shows God's concern for, and blessing of, all peoples – not just the Israelites. The biblical account affirms that God is the God of all nations – a truly revolutionary concept for the ancient world where each culture believed in and worshipped its own gods who were believed to essentially ignore any other peoples.

Another central theological concept found within Genesis 10-11 is summed up in the old saying that "Man proposes but God disposes," meaning that humanity may boldly propose great things, but God may not allow them to happen. While this principle has national and international relevance (Daniel 2:21; etc.), it also has individual application, as Proverbs 16:9 tells us and the apostle James elaborates:

> Now listen, you who say, "Today or tomorrow we will go to this or that city, spend a year there, carry on business and make money." Why, you do not even know what will happen tomorrow. What is your life? You are a mist that appears for a little while and then vanishes. Instead, you ought to say, "If it is the Lord's will, we will live and do this or that." (James 4:13-15)

The principle of divine deterrence (where God preemptively deflects human plans) is first seen in the Babel story. Although Genesis tells us that God intervened in human affairs a number of times in early history, those interventions were always a result of what humans had done. The Babel story shows that God also sometimes involves himself in the plans for what humans want to do. This fact is stressed in Genesis when God says: "If as one people speaking the same language they have begun to do this, then nothing they plan to do will be impossible for them. Come, let us go down and confuse their language so they will not understand each other" (Genesis 11:6-7).

Of course, we should not presume from these words that God's knowledge and power are limited and that he must act preemptively, or that he is normally unaware of what is going on in the world except when he comes to see first-hand. The story indicates instead that God sees all, and that he can and does intervene in history at times as he thinks best for humankind.

A final theological lesson that we can glean from the accounts of Genesis 10-11 is that of the dangers of human unity. God does desire that as much as possible people live in moral and religious unity, of course, but even in

those areas there are potential problems. All too often those who clamor for religious or moral unity desire a unity based on *their* religion or moral ideas. The Babel story certainly teaches us that God is very much aware of the problems inherent in ultimate political unity. A united world with all power concentrated in the hands of a few would be a dangerous place indeed. The stress placed on the many individual cultures found in the Table of Nations which forms the introduction to the Tower of Babel story is clearly a rebuttal of the single socio-political culture that was being attempted at Babel.

*Note 1: The Mesopotamian temple ziggurats were constructed of rubble or simple dried mud bricks with a casing of baked clay bricks (Genesis 11:3) which were more impervious to the elements. There were no rooms within these temple towers (apart from a small room at the very top which was furnished with a bed and table intended for the comfort of visiting gods), and their solid construction means that a number of the ziggurats have survived at least partially and can still be seen in what are now the nations of Iraq and Iran. Essentially, a ziggurat was a huge stairway.

*Note 2: The expression "Come let us go down and confuse their language" (Genesis 11:7) represents the second occasion in Genesis where God speaks in the plural. As we saw in Chapter 2, it could be that God was addressing a heavenly audience or the preincarnate Son of God. However, in Genesis 11 it may also be a further irony woven into the story, as God's words effectively parody the words of the people "Come let us [go up]" (Genesis 11:4) as they sought to build a tower to the heavens.

7. ABRAHAM

BACKGROUND AND PERSPECTIVES:

Beginning with the story of Abraham, Genesis moves from a broad history of the world having many similarities to the origin stories of Mesopotamia to the specific and unique history of one man and his descendants. There is also an important change of setting for these stories of Abraham as he leaves Mesopotamia and travels to the land of Canaan.

The importance of Abraham is seen in the fact that he is featured in fourteen chapters of Genesis (more chapters than those describing the stories of creation, fall, and flood combined). The patriarch's story is also spread across a broad stage – the great geographic arc known as the "Fertile Crescent" (the white area in the map below) which stretched from Mesopotamia in the east to Egypt in the west, and which formed a broad highway for travel and migration across the ancient Near East.

We are told that Abram (as he was called at first) was from the city of Ur, and it has long been presumed that was the great Sumerian city in southern Mesopotamia. However, recent scholarship has shown that Abram was probably from another, smaller city of Ur in northern Mesopotamia – in the area known as Aram near the modern Syrian-Turkish border. This is because the Bible refers to Abram's family as being from "Aram Naharaim" or "Paddan Aram" (Genesis 24:10; 28:2; and see Deuteronomy 26:5: "my father was a wandering Aramean"). Also, the Bible speaks of Abram as coming from "beyond the river Euphrates" (Joshua 24:2-3), which was only true of the northern city of Ur.

The city of Haran to which Abram and his father Terah traveled was also in northern Mesopotamia (not far from the northern Ur) and was a major crossroads for travel between Mesopotamia and the area of Canaan where Terah and Abram planned to go.

After Terah's death in Haran, Abram took his wife Sarai and his nephew Lot and traveled down to Shechem in the land of Canaan, before going further to Egypt and then returning to Canaan. This was a major journey for that period in history – one of many hundreds of miles and one with many potential dangers. Travelers, trade caravans, and even cities along the route were often attacked and plundered (as we see in Genesis 14), and the fact that Abram did not experience more problems of this type

throughout such a long journey indicates how large his entourage was, and that he had many trained armed servants (see chapter 7 in *Lessons from Old Testament Leaders*).

Simplified map showing the location of the two cities called Ur, Haran, and Shechem. Image base: d-maps.

UNDERSTANDING THE TEXT:

The story of Abraham is a many-faceted one from which we can learn much (see, for example, chapter 1 in *Lessons from Old Testament Leaders*), but in this chapter we will concentrate on a series of connected events that represent the most significant aspect of Abraham's life: the covenant God made with him.

According to Joshua 24:2 Abraham's family worshiped pagan gods in Mesopotamia, and we do not know when or how Abraham came to the knowledge of the true God – or why God chose Abraham as the founder of the nation he would work with so closely. But the Bible does provide a great amount of information on how God worked with Abraham and established him as the "father of the faithful."

It was doubtless a considerable test of Abraham's faith when God called him to leave Mesopotamia. God told him "Go from your country, your people and your father's household to the land I will show you" (Genesis

12:1), and we should notice the triple stress God placed on the fact that Abraham would have to leave his homeland, his own people, and his own family. God gave Abraham further difficult commands as the patriarch's story unfolds, but none as difficult as the final test we are told of – in which God instructed Abraham to sacrifice his son Isaac.

Once again, we see the triple stress God places on the difficulty of the task he was commanding Abraham: "Take your son, your only son, [the son] whom you love—Isaac—and go to the region of Moriah. Sacrifice him there as a burnt offering on a mountain I will show you" (Genesis 22:2). Reading the story at face value we might ask ourselves how a good and just God could do such a cruel thing – how God could make Abraham suffer in thinking that he would have to sacrifice his own son, even if God intended to halt the sacrifice. To answer that question, we must keep three things in mind.

First, we must remember that God's command to sacrifice Isaac did not occur without a context. God had already commanded Abraham to do a number of difficult things, beginning with his calling to leave Mesopotamia and go to the land of Canaan. Abraham had seen how God had made every one of those situations work out and had grown to trust God. Abraham himself had said, "Will not the Judge of all the earth do right?" (Genesis 18:25), and clearly this was a rhetorical question. Abraham knew that even if he did not understand God's reasons, whatever God commanded would be right and that he could trust God. This was Abraham's faith in action.

Second, it seems clear that Abraham was confident that God would work out the situation, even if God had to bring Isaac back from the dead. Hebrews 11:19 tells us specifically that "Abraham reasoned that God could even raise the dead." So when they reached the area of Mount Moriah Abraham told his servants, "Stay here with the donkey while I and the boy go over there. We will worship and then *we will come back to you*" (Genesis 22:5, emphasis added). Soon after, when Isaac asked his father where the lamb for the sacrifice would come from Abraham replied, "God himself will provide the lamb for the burnt offering, my son." Again, we see Abraham's faith in action.

Third, we must remember that God knew Abraham's mind, knew his level of faith, and knew his level of trust. Tests are the same whether they are given in an academic setting or a moral one. The more advanced the person being tested, the harder the test is. But God knew that Abraham's faith was great and that he would come through the situation (Romans 4:20–21). The New Testament tells us that: "God is faithful: He will not let

you be tried beyond what you are able to bear, but with the trial will also provide a way out so that you are able to endure it" (1 Corinthians 10:13 NET). We see that this principle applied in Abraham's situation. God knew Abraham's strength, just as Abraham knew God's goodness.

But if God is all knowing, as we know he is (Psalm 147:5; etc.), why would God have to perform such a test? Did he not know if Abraham would obey him or not? The answer is that God surely did know, and so the test was not for God's benefit, but for the benefit of Abraham and for us. God was doubtless teaching Abraham in this great test, but he was also providing a lesson in faith for all of Abraham's descendants – both physical and spiritual (Galatians 3:29) – the people through whom God planned to work throughout history. Christians also believe Abraham's test profoundly foreshadowed the sacrifice of Jesus Christ in the following parallels:

1. In both stories a loving father is willing to sacrifice his own son (Genesis 22:10; John 3:16).

2. Both Isaac and Jesus were "beloved" and "only" sons who were born miraculously (Genesis 22:2; Hebrews 11:11).

3. The hill of Moriah on which Isaac was to be sacrificed was the area where the city of Jerusalem would later stand (Genesis 22:2; 2 Chronicles 3:1) and where Jesus was crucified.

4. Both sons carried the wood on which they would be sacrificed (Genesis 22:6; John 19:17).

5. Both sons went obediently toward their deaths (Genesis 22:3; Philippians 2:8).

Although Abraham was spared the actual sacrifice of his son, the strain of the situation must have been great on him as well as on Isaac and Sarah, and it may have been more than Abraham's marriage could bear. Perhaps significantly, after this event Abraham is not said to have returned to Hebron where Sarah was, but to have gone and settled in Beer Sheba (Genesis 22:19). Genesis does not mention the couple together again, and when Sarah died it appears that Abraham traveled to where Sarah had been living to mourn her (Genesis 23:2, and see note 1 below). Yet we can only

believe that the difficulty of this situation was offset by the incredible promises given to Abraham, Sarah, and their descendants.

KEY THEOLOGICAL CONCEPTS:

The Abrahamic Covenant affected all subsequent biblical history and is summarized in God's words to Abram when he called him in Mesopotamia (Genesis 12:1-3):

1. "Go from your country, your people and your father's household to the land I will show you.

2. I will make you into a great nation, and I will bless you; I will make your name great, and you will be a blessing.

3. I will bless those who bless you, and whoever curses you I will curse; and all peoples on earth will be blessed through you."

Note that there are three distinct aspects or parts to this covenant with each part corresponding to one of the first three verses of Genesis 12:

1. The Promise of Land: The first aspect of the Abrahamic covenant can be found in Genesis 12:1 and relates to the physical area that God promised Abraham – the promised land – which in Abraham's time was the land of Canaan (Genesis 12:6-7). This part of the covenant was clarified by God on several occasions (Genesis 13:15; 15:18). Although he never received it in his lifetime, eventually the promised land was settled by his descendants (Joshua 22:1-7) and known as Israel, as it was named after Abraham's grandson Jacob whose name was changed to Israel.

2. The Promise of Descendants: The second aspect of the covenant is the promise of descendants for Abraham that is spelled out in Genesis 12:2, and in Genesis 22:17-18, where God promised that they would be as numerous as the sand on the seashore and the stars in the sky. This promise was made when Abraham was already 75 years old and still childless. It would be many more years before the promise began to be fulfilled in the birth of his son Isaac, and centuries before the promise that God would make a "great nation" of him (Genesis 17:6) also came to pass. It was

because of this promise that God changed Abram's name to Abraham, meaning "father of many [nations]."

3. The Promise of Blessing: The third and final part of the Abrahamic covenant is found in Genesis 12:3 where God promises great blessings not to Abraham and his descendants, but to other nations – that "all peoples on earth will be blessed through you." This part of the covenant clearly was not fulfilled in Abraham's time, or even in the following centuries; it is a promise that would only find ultimate fulfillment in Abraham's distant descendant – Jesus Christ (John 3:16-17).

This great threefold covenant was made unilaterally – God made the agreement with Abraham without setting conditions, just as he did with his covenant with Noah. God did command Abraham to do certain things – such as telling him to leave his homeland, telling him to circumcise himself and his male descendants, and eventually telling him to sacrifice his son Isaac. But none of these commands – other than the initial command to leave Ur and travel to Canaan – was tied directly to the fulfillment of the covenant to which God then bound himself.

We also see the unilateral aspect of the covenant in Genesis 15:9-21 where God seals it with Abraham (still Abram at the time) by means of animal sacrifices. After killing the sacrificial animals, Abram divided them into halves, placing them on the ground in such a way that a person could walk between the pieces. We are told that God then caused Abram to fall into a deep sleep and that: "When the sun had set and darkness had fallen, a smoking firepot with a blazing torch appeared and passed between the pieces. On that day the Lord made a covenant with Abram" (Genesis 15:17-18).

This seemingly strange event was the enactment of an ancient Near Eastern legal ceremony in which an agreement was made between two unequal parties – one of higher status and one of lower status – and in which land was granted to the ruler of lower status. In this ritual, animals were sacrificed and divided and one or both participants to the covenant walked between the halves of the animals as a way to seal the agreement (Jeremiah 34:18).

Genesis specifically tells us that Abram was placed in a deep sleep so that the covenant was clearly sealed by God alone – God not only used the legal procedures of Abram's time to make a binding covenant with him, but also to show that the covenant was not dependent upon Abram's actions. It

was, in a very real sense, a covenant based on faith in God's promises rather than Abraham's works. That the covenant was made unilaterally can be seen in Hosea 1:9-10.

Nevertheless, the obedience that came from Abraham's faith was involved in the covenant in the sense that it enabled the promises to be fulfilled, and was the outcome of Abraham's faith that God expected and desired (Genesis 18:19; 22:16–18). In the New Testament, both Paul and James quote the same verse that Abraham "believed God, and it was counted to him as righteousness" (Genesis 15:6). But James stresses Abraham's obedience (James 2:21-23) while Paul stresses the patriarch's faith (Romans 4:1-5).

Above all, we see that the story of God's working with Abraham applies directly to us – as the apostle Paul powerfully tells us in the book of Galatians: "If you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham's seed, and heirs according to the promise" (Galatians 3:29)!

* Note 1: Abraham's continued love for Sarah is also seen in the fact that he willingly paid the exorbitant amount of 400 shekels of silver – for the land to bury Sarah – at a time when a laborer would not make more than ten shekels in a year's work and probably not make 400 shekels in a lifetime. It is often noted that despite the promises made to him, this was the only land within the promised land that Abraham actually owned in his own lifetime.

8.PATRIARCHS AND PROMISES

BACKGROUND AND PERSPECTIVES:

The story of Abraham's descendants Isaac and Jacob is one of great contrast. While fourteen chapters of Genesis are devoted to the life of Abraham, only two are given to the life of his son Isaac, and a more substantial nine chapters concern Isaac's son Jacob. This situation seems to reflect a clear pattern in the lives of the three patriarchs. Abraham and Jacob were active individuals and much happened during their lives. Isaac, on the other hand, while clearly obedient to God, appears to have been of a more passive disposition and seldom pushed the biblical story in new directions. The promises God made to Abraham came to Isaac (Genesis 26:2-4) – rather than his elder brother Ishmael – without any planning or work on Isaac's part, and perhaps as a result, he did not need to struggle for them as his father or son did.

While the names of both Isaac's father and son were changed to reflect their actions or changing status, Isaac's name was never changed. He seems to have been the only patriarch who led a settled life, sometimes pursuing crop growing (Genesis 26:12) rather than animal herding, and he alone of the patriarchs never traveled outside the promised land. When Isaac dug wells, they were frequently taken over by other people, and he simply continued to dig more wells rather than strive to keep the ones that were rightfully his (Genesis 26:18-22). Isaac was clearly a man of peace, and he was God's choice to carry forward the promises to Abraham, yet his passive disposition is equally clear.

Perhaps for this reason God gave Isaac a wife who was more actively inclined and who was used in fulfilling God's plans for Abraham's descendants. In fact, much of the two chapters in which Isaac appears is devoted not to Isaac, but to his wife Rebekah. When Isaac was forty years old and still unmarried, Abraham sought a wife for him in order to make the promises to their descendants possible. Genesis 24 tells us that Abraham sent his most trusted servant Eliezer back to the area of Aram from which Abraham had come to find a wife for Isaac from among their own people (an example not followed by Isaac, whose son Jacob eventually went off to find a wife for himself!). This same chapter tells how Abraham's servant was guided by God to meet Rebekah – a young unmarried relative

of Abraham – at the city well and the text emphasizes both her humility and kindness in the way she responded to Eliezer's request for water and help (Genesis 24:18-25).

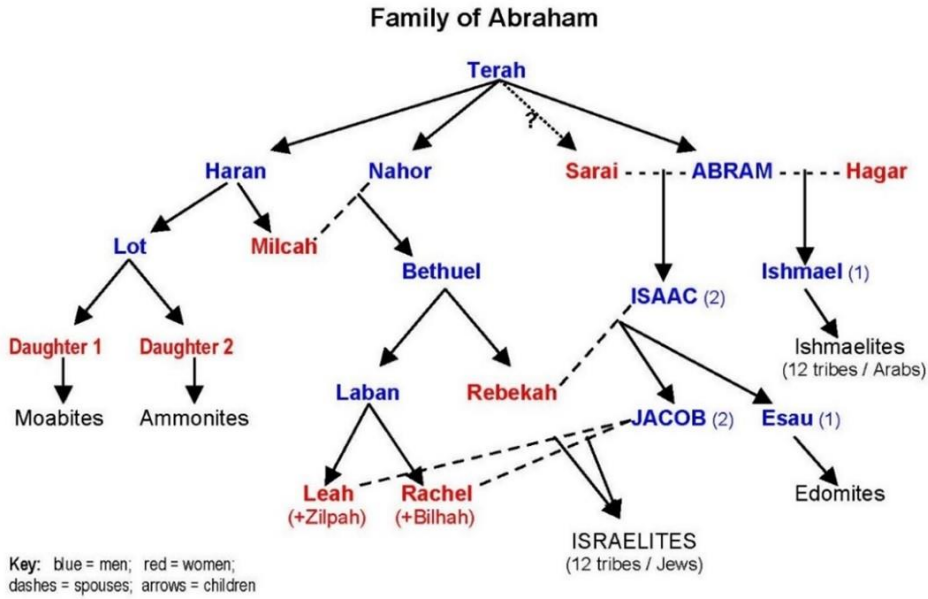
We know from later comments in Genesis that Rebekah was also beautiful (Genesis 26:7-9), and she was clearly the antithesis of passivity. She is introduced to us as a woman of non-stop activity – the subject of eleven verbs of action in four short verses of text (Genesis 24:16, 18-20) – and while the water jar she carried probably held no more than two or three gallons at most, the camels of Eliezer for which she drew water could easily drink twenty or more gallons each!

Rebekah was also mature and respected by her family to the point that they asked her whether or not she wanted to leave home immediately and travel to Canaan to become Isaac's wife (Genesis 24:57-58) – in a place and time where the majority of marriages were arranged by parents without their children having any say in the matter. When the time came for her to make her choice, Rebekah responded decisively and with confidence in the face of the unknown.

If it is true that "opposites attract," it is perhaps not surprising that we are told almost immediately after meeting Rebekah, Isaac fell in love with her (Genesis 24:67). Interestingly, this is only the second time in the Bible that love is mentioned. First, we are told of the parental love of Abraham for his son Isaac (Genesis 22:2), and then we are told of Isaac's love for Rebekah. Both were obviously great loves to be singled out for mention, and it is doubtless not coincidental that at a time when concubines were common, Isaac did not take any concubines, and he is the sole patriarch of whom we are told he had only one wife – Rebekah.

But love is not always without problems, as we see in the unfolding of the story. Like the other matriarchs of the Genesis story – Sarah and Rachel – Rebekah was unable to have children. But when Isaac prayed for her, she became pregnant and later gave birth to twin sons – Esau and Jacob – the Bible telling us that Esau was born first, though only just (Genesis 25:26). As the boys grew, love enters the picture a third time, but now in a problematic way: "Isaac … loved Esau, but Rebekah loved Jacob" (Genesis 25:28).

This brings us to the event on which we will focus in this chapter – the transfer of the birthright from Esau to Jacob and the roles that their parents played in this important situation.



The Family of Abraham. Image: Catholic Resources

UNDERSTANDING THE TEXT:

In Genesis 25:22 we read that when Rebekah became pregnant with Jacob and Esau, "The babies jostled each other within her, and she said, 'Why is this happening to me?' So she went to inquire of the LORD." We do not know how exactly Rebekah made this inquiry, but we are told that God replied "Two nations are in your womb, and two peoples from within you will be separated; one people will be stronger than the other, and the older will serve the younger" (Genesis 25:23).

This is the only recorded instance of one of the matriarchs receiving a revelation from God, and it speaks highly of Rebekah in that she sought God and was answered by him. We should note that God's answer was not directly about the children, but about the family lines that would descend from them. Nevertheless, God made it clear that the older son would be subject to the younger, and we must keep this in mind when we examine the way in which Rebekah later devised a scheme to ensure that her second-born son, Jacob, would receive the birthright blessing of her firstborn son, Esau. But this event followed an incident in which Jacob himself successfully negotiated to purchase Esau's birthright from him – the infamous bowl of stew for which Esau agreed to give up his birthright share (Genesis 25:29-34).

In the time of the patriarchs, it was customary in the ancient Near East that a family inheritance would be divided into the same number of portions as there were sons – plus one – and the eldest son received his own plus the extra portion, thus giving him a double share. In saying that Jacob purchased the family birthright, Genesis does not mean Esau's entire inheritance, but the additional share that was the right of the firstborn son – and, by extension, the father's blessing that came with it.

What Jacob did in taking advantage of his brother to obtain his birthright might seem entirely wrong, although it is sometimes argued that he did not take the birthright by force or even through trickery, and that he openly negotiated and purchased it. Perhaps Jacob also knew that Esau thought lightly of his birthright, as Genesis seems to indicate. The New Testament certainly takes this approach, and the writer of the book of Hebrews maintains that Esau's attitude was one of profanity – treating lightly what he should have deeply respected (Hebrews 12:16).

But whatever we might think of Jacob's "buying" his brother's birthright portion, this was not as important as the blessing Esau lost due to the deception in favor of Jacob that was arranged by Rebekah (Genesis 27). The blessings or curses pronounced by the patriarch of the family were in a sense the nearest thing to a formal "will" in the nomadic culture of the time, and they were considered equally binding.

Also, as far as Rebekah's involvement in the blessing of Jacob rather than Esau (Genesis 27:5-13), she knew that Jacob was God's choice for the birthright, as we have seen (Genesis 25:23), and she seems to have had total confidence in what she was doing – to the extent of saying that she would take any resultant curse on herself when Jacob wavered regarding tricking his father (Genesis 27:11-13).

Once encouraged, Jacob seems to have adapted to this situation with little difficulty, however, and the extent of his own deceptive behavior is extraordinary: "Jacob said to his father, 'I am Esau your firstborn. I have done as you told me. Please sit up and eat some of my game, so that you may give me your blessing'" (Genesis 27:19). As is so often the case with these early stories of the patriarchs, the Bible does not comment on the moral rightness or otherwise of Rebekah and Jacob's actions. We do know that it was God's will that the birthright be overturned, and we are left to presume that God worked out his will in the situation through the strengths or the weaknesses of the individuals concerned.

But we might also ask why, if God had made clear to Rebekah his will for Jacob to inherit the birthright, God did not also make his will on this

matter clear to Isaac. Could it be the passivity of this patriarch that is so clearly seen in the Scriptures had something to do with this situation and his possible unwillingness to go against the established practices of the society in which he lived? We are not given enough information to be sure, but we do know that when Isaac found he had blessed his younger rather than his firstborn son he was emotionally distraught (Genesis 27:33). Perhaps the realization that the birthright was being overturned between his sons – just as it was in his own case, when Isaac inherited the birthright that would have gone to his older half-brother Ishmael – was a conflicting and emotionally difficult one for the aged patriarch who knew what family turmoil would result.

Nevertheless, there was a positive outcome to this troubled family saga, as later in their lives Isaac and Ishmael were reconciled (Genesis 25:9), as were Jacob and Esau (Genesis 33:1-10). We are told that Isaac, like his father Abraham, died contented (the only two individuals in the first five books of the Bible of whom this is said). And Jacob lived to an old age – not only fathering the sons from whom the tribes of Israel would descend, but also adopting two grandsons (the sons of Joseph). This was another overturning of sorts – in which Jacob gave his fullest blessing to his younger grandson, Ephraim, rather than to the firstborn, Manasseh (Genesis 48:17-20).

KEY THEOLOGICAL CONCEPTS:

When we put the biblical accounts of the lives of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob together, we find several underlying threads. First, we see in the lives of the patriarchs the beginnings of God's plan to repair the damage done in humanity's turning from him that began with the story of Eden and continued throughout Genesis 1-11. With Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, we see not only a promise of land and descendants being given, but also of wider blessings that presuppose a renewed relationship with God. In the patriarchal succession we see God's faithfulness and perseverance in continuing the promises after Abraham's death, despite the failings and shortcomings of the family God chose.

This is a second lesson we can learn from the patriarchs – that God was willing to give his promises to, and work through, a seriously flawed family line. Although we celebrate the patriarchs as heroes of faith, we see in their lives repeated instances of compromise (Genesis 16:1-4; etc.), conflict

(Genesis 27:41; etc.), and deceit (Genesis 27:19; etc.), to name only some of the evident problems.

Yet if we look carefully, we can see real change occurring in the lives of Abraham, Isaac, and even the deceptive Jacob. Having received God's promises in a dream, Jacob pledged his loyalty to God (Genesis 28:10-22) and afterward lived a very changed life. By the end of their lives all the patriarchs had exhibited repeated instances of obedience and faith, and this is a timeless lesson for all who follow in their footsteps. Although human frailty and failure is on clear display in the lives of all the patriarchs, God's power and desire to work with them – and us – is made equally clear in their stories.

A third lesson that we can learn from the patriarchal narratives is one that is developed as an important concept in the New Testament. While in the time of the patriarchs law and custom dictated that the birthright promises were to be given to a family's eldest son, God turned this principle upside down in overturning the birthright in *each generation* of the patriarchs who followed Abraham. The promises he had given to Abraham were repeatedly passed to a younger rather than the eldest son – through Isaac and not Ishmael, through Jacob and not Esau, and through the younger son of Jacob's son Joseph.

God's purposefulness in this overturning is seen on several occasions in that his will to pass the blessing to the younger sons was made clear before they were even born. It is not because Isaac and Jacob were judged better than their elder siblings by virtue of their behavior or works, but simply because God had decreed it would be so. In the same way, God overturned the spiritual aspects of the birthright once again in giving the promises to his spiritual children – Israelite or Gentile (Hebrews 11:39). The apostle Paul confirms this in saying: "If you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham's seed, and heirs according to the promise" (Galatians 3:29), and he uses the story of the patriarchs to clarify this in the book of Romans:

> … not all who are descended from Israel are Israel. Nor because they are his descendants are they all Abraham's children. On the contrary, "It is through Isaac that your offspring will be reckoned." In other words, it is not the children by physical descent who are God's children, but it is the children of the promise who are regarded as Abraham's offspring." (Romans 9:6-8)

In saying this, Paul stresses that God's working in our lives – just as in the lives of the patriarchs – is based on his purposes and grace and not on any virtue of our own. Paul makes the parallel explicit:

> Rebekah's children were conceived at the same time by our father Isaac. Yet, before the twins were born or had done anything good or bad—in order that God's purpose in election might stand: not by works but by him who calls—she was told, "The older will serve the younger." Just as it is written: "Jacob I loved …" (Romans 9:10-13)

Perhaps this is the greatest lesson we can learn from the promises given to the patriarchs – and, by extension, to us today – that our relationship with God has nothing to do with either our physical descent or our spiritual works, but is based entirely on God's love and the promises he holds out to us.

9. JOSEPH

BACKGROUND AND PERSPECTIVES:

There are a number of areas in which history and archeology add to our understanding of the story of Joseph, and in this section we will look at some of these points of contact. We know that Joseph was sold into slavery by his brothers and taken to Egypt by Midianite traders (see Note 1). In the ancient Near East slaves were usually prisoners of war or victims of slave-raiding, but traders often bought and sold slaves, whom they transported to areas around the Fertile Crescent. Genesis 37:26 tells us the traders paid 20 shekels of silver for Joseph, which is known to have been the price of slaves in the period of time when Joseph would have lived. By the time of Moses, who wrote down the account, or at the even later time some critics of the Bible suggest the Joseph story was written, slave prices were two or three times higher.

Biblical critics have frequently denied the historicity of the Joseph account on the basis that it would be "unlikely" that a foreign slave could ever rise to great power in Egypt. But this is to ignore the special circumstances that Genesis clearly elaborates, and to be ignorant of many discoveries of Egyptian archaeology. We have evidence of a number of Semitic individuals who rose to considerable power in Egypt (see Note 2) and many examples of individuals of lowly status being promoted to high levels.

The fact that "no evidence" exists of Joseph as an actual Egyptian high official does not mean anything. In the 1980's the tomb of a previously unknown New Kingdom vizier of Egypt (whose position was directly under that of the Pharaoh – just as Joseph is said to have been) was discovered in Saqqara in Egypt. This powerful vizier, named Aper-el, was also a Semite and was buried in an un-Egyptian, Semitic manner along with his family members – just as Jacob and Joseph had chosen to be (Genesis 49:29; 50:25). If the existence of a person as powerful as Aper-el could be unknown to modern historians until the recent discovery of his tomb, it is hardly significant that we do not at this time have specific archaeological proof of Joseph – whose importance was comparable to that of Aper-el (especially as Joseph probably lived in the relatively less documented Second Intermediate Period of Egyptian history, c. 1786-1570 BC).

We also have archaeological evidence of groups of Semitic people travelling to Egypt for trade or to settle in difficult times – just as we read was the case with Joseph's brothers and eventually his whole family (Genesis 47:1). The illustration below is from a Middle Kingdom (the period directly before the probable time of Joseph) scene painted in an Egyptian tomb at Beni Hassan and shows a group of Western Semitic people arriving in Egypt (the two figures at the top right are Egyptians).

Tomb painting of Semitic people arriving in Egypt, Beni Hassan c. 1890 BC.
Image: Archival

Finally, it is known that large numbers of Semitic people settled in the fertile Egyptian Delta region – where Genesis tells us the Israelites settled in Egypt – in times of drought and famine in Canaan, and specifically in the period in which Genesis indicates Joseph and his family went there. These Semitic peoples reached their greatest numbers in Egypt during the Second Intermediate Period (c. 1700-1500 BC) when Joseph seems to have lived. In fact, so many Semites were present in Egypt at this time that the Delta region was actually controlled by local rulers of Syro-Palestinian origin. In other words, the conditions and political situation revealed by Egyptian archaeology in this period are exactly those described by Genesis and the Joseph story in particular.

UNDERSTANDING THE TEXT:

Dreams play an important role throughout the Joseph story – first the dreams of the young Joseph that get him into trouble, and then the dreams of others that he later interprets that get him out of trouble! Dreams in the ancient world were thought to provide information from the divine realm and were therefore taken very seriously.

But dreams were often filled with symbols that needed to be interpreted, and many Near Eastern cultures had priests who were responsible for dream interpretation. In the Joseph story, Pharaoh's magicians are called "interpreters of dreams" (Genesis 41:8; 24), and in Genesis 40:8 the two officials imprisoned with Joseph lament that they had dreams "and there is no one to interpret them." Joseph served as the "dream interpreter" for the two officials, as he did for Pharaoh a few years later (Genesis 41:15-36).

This gift from God was the basis, of course, of Joseph's promotion to second in command under Pharaoh – and the basis of the second part of the new name, "Zaphnath-Paaneah," given to Joseph by Pharaoh. The first part of that name as recorded in Genesis means "Overseer of the Storehouse of Abundance," and the second part probably means "He of excellent spirit/intellect" (see Genesis 41:38) – both names that applied perfectly to Joseph's situation.

Perhaps significantly, when Joseph later revealed himself to his brothers (Genesis 45), he did not mention his position as Overseer of the Storehouse of Abundance, but chose to refer to himself by three other titles: "a father to Pharaoh, and lord of all his house, and ruler throughout the land of Egypt" (Genesis 45:8). These three titles are all well-known among the very highest-ranking Egyptian officials, and the title "Father to Pharaoh" is particularly interesting as it was subtly changed by Joseph from the Egyptian "Father of the god" (meaning Pharaoh) – showing a clear knowledge of Egyptian titles as well as the religious sensitivity of Joseph himself.

The other Egyptian names found in the Joseph account – those of Joseph's master, Potiphar (Genesis 39:1); Joseph's wife, Asenath (Genesis 41:45); and his father-in-law, Potiphera (Genesis 41:45) – are all understandable as good ancient Egyptian names. Likewise, the details of Joseph's investiture by Pharaoh (the signet ring, neck-chain, and special linen robe, as well as the official chariot escort that Genesis 41:42-43 tells us were given to Joseph by the Pharaoh are exactly the insignia of office of the highest-ranking Egyptians).

Other aspects of the account all demonstrate that the author of this story had extensive knowledge of the Egyptian culture and especially the royal court – as Moses, who was raised in Pharaoh's household, did (Acts 7:22).

Another historical reference that helps us understand the text in this section of Genesis is that the marriage arranged for Joseph (Genesis 41:45) allied him with one of the most powerful priestly families in Egypt. The city called "On" in some translations of the Bible was the great city of Heliopolis – the center of the sun-cult in Egypt that served the sun god Re or Ra. Marriage into this priestly family both "normalized" his new citizenship and also helped to keep the delicate balance of political and religious power in ancient Egypt.

An even smaller yet meaningful detail we might notice in the text that is rooted in the reality of the time is that in the great meal Joseph provided for his brothers, the servants served Joseph, his brothers, and the Egyptians separately. This is because ancient Egypt was one of, if not the leading culture of the ancient world and the Egyptians considered peoples of other cultures to be barbarians.

As a result, the Egyptians would not eat at the same table as the foreigners, and Joseph's place was separated from both the Egyptians and the visiting Israelites because of his elevated rank. The details of this type found throughout the Joseph story clearly and continually support the account's veracity.

A final detail to be aware of in this section of Genesis is the way in which Jacob, on settling in Egypt, adopted Josephs' two sons as his own (Genesis 48). This was not only a mark of affection on the part of Jacob, but it was also a concrete way in which he could transfer two portions of his sons' inheritance to Joseph – and so be able to indirectly give Joseph the double portion of the inheritance due to the firstborn, as we saw in chapter 8.

KEY THEOLOGICAL CONCEPTS:

The importance of the account of Joseph is seen in that Genesis devotes far more space to it than the stories of Adam or Noah and as much space as is given to Abraham. Although God does not appear directly to Joseph as he did to some of the earlier figures, we see God behind the ongoing circumstances described in the Joseph story more than any other in Genesis. We learn a great deal, in fact, about how God works in human lives and situations throughout Joseph's story, culminating in the great expression of God's providence spoken by Joseph himself: "it was to save

lives that God sent me ahead of you" (Genesis 45:5), and "You intended to harm me, but God intended it for good to accomplish what is now being done, the saving of many lives" (Genesis 50:20). Perhaps nowhere else in the Bible is this theological concept more clearly illustrated.

Another thing we see relative to God in this story is that throughout the whole account when God's actions are recorded, the word used for God is the Hebrew word Yahweh – which we saw in chapter 3 is used to refer to God's personal attributes and his personal relationship with humans. On the other hand, whenever Joseph speaks about God – whether to Potiphar's wife, to those imprisoned with him, to Pharaoh, or to his own brothers, he uses the word Elohim – the name associated with the power and majesty of God. In this small detail we see the reality of Joseph's continued respectful attitude toward God and God's continued personal care for him (Genesis 39:21; etc.).

But if Joseph's story teaches us important lessons about God, it also teaches us a great many things about life in general, and especially about the failings of human nature and the possibility of rising above them. The Joseph account is full of insights into interpersonal – especially family – relationships, and Joseph himself is a figure of righteous character. With the possible exception of a youthful lack of discretion in telling his brothers about his dreams (though he was evidently a young teenager at that time and could hardly be expected to act wisely regarding the exciting revelations given to him), nothing negative is said about Joseph throughout his whole life story. Among the characters who are discussed in detail, Joseph is unique in this regard up to this point in the Bible.

Joseph exhibited a great many positive qualities, and his life story exhibits many applied theological principles. His great patience and perseverance are evident throughout the account, and many of his other characteristics, such as his forgiveness, are so striking that it is not difficult to see why later biblical writers held up Joseph as a benchmark. At many points in 1 Samuel, for example, David is shown to be a type of Joseph, and many Christians have long seen Joseph as an Old Testament type of Christ himself (see Note 3).

Perhaps no quality of Joseph was more important, however, than his faithfulness, which we see expressed continually toward God and toward others – especially in the special situation of his own family.

Despite the many difficult events of his life (being sold into slavery, falsely accused of rape by Potiphar's wife, imprisoned for years, and left forgotten in prison for two more years by the chief cupbearer), Joseph was

faithful and never questioned God's will. Likewise, when things went well (sometimes an even harder test for people), Joseph continued in his faithful relationship with God. The way in which Joseph cited faithfulness to God in refusing to give in to seduction (Genesis 39:9) and the way in which he continually gave credit to God (Genesis 40:8; 41:16; etc.) are just some examples of his faithfulness in this area.

Joseph was likewise faithful to others – as we see in his obedience to his father's requests (Genesis 37:12-17), his refusal to betray the trust Potiphar had placed in him (Genesis 39:8), and, of course, his faithfulness to his family – even when most of his siblings had betrayed him (Genesis 50:15-18). Not only did Joseph not resort to revenge when he had opportunity, but also he blessed his brothers and treated them with love (Genesis 50:19-21). We see that faithfulness based on love in dozens of details of the story – such as when the brothers returned to Canaan to fetch Jacob and Joseph urged them not to be angry (Genesis 45:5; Habakkuk 2:3; etc.; rather than "do not fear" as in many English translations) and punish themselves on account of what they had done to him (Genesis 45:24). Even after their father Jacob died and the brothers realized there was nothing now holding Joseph back from punishing them, we see Joseph's total faithfulness toward them (Genesis 50:15-21). Few characters in the Old Testament teach us about faithfulness as much as Joseph.

* Note 1: There may seem to be a contradiction between Genesis 37:28 which says the Ishmaelites sold Joseph in Egypt and Genesis 37:36 which says the Midianites sold him there, but the Hebrew of this verse literally says that they sold him "toward Egypt" meaning they were involved in the overall process.

* Note 2: For example, the Semitic New Kingdom Egyptian official named Bay who was given the title "Great Chancellor of the Entire Land" – directly reminiscent of the power invested in Joseph (Genesis 41:41).

* Note 3: The similarities between the lives of Joseph and Jesus are many. A few of the ones commonly cited include: they were beloved of their father, it was foretold that they would rule, they were not recognized by their people, mocked by their families, sent by their father to seek their brothers' welfare, both were sold by one of twelve named Judah (Judas in Greek), they were sold for pieces of silver, stripped of their robes, delivered up to the Gentiles, falsely accused, numbered with wrongdoers, thrown into prison, they stood before rulers, embraced God's will even though it brought them physical harm, they were the instrument God used to bless his people, and it was decreed that people must bow the knee before them.

10. MOSES

BACKGROUND AND PERSPECTIVES:

The book of Exodus begins with a Pharaoh who did not know Joseph coming to power, and the subsequent enslavement of the Hebrew people who had multiplied in Egypt (Exodus 1:6-14). The increasingly brutal enslavement eventually turned to genocide as the Egyptian king decreed the killing of male Hebrew children (Exodus 1:15-22). Exodus briefly tells the story of the courageous midwives who resisted this decree, but the king then decreed that the newborn Hebrew males be thrown into the River Nile. It was during this time that Moses was born.

Skeptics sometimes claim that the story of the infant Moses being placed in a basket of reeds in the River Nile, to escape the slaughter perpetrated by the pharaoh, is a retelling of part of an earlier Mesopotamian story called "The Legend of Sargon." In that story, a king named Sargon claims his mother was a priestess who attempted to cover up the birth of her baby by placing him in a reed basket which she let drift away on the Euphrates River. According to the story, the baby was found by a servant who raised him under the guidance of the goddess Inanna.

While this story may seem startlingly like that of Moses at first sight, there are very real reasons why the accounts cannot be associated. Most scholars of ancient Mesopotamia agree that the Legend of Sargon does not date to the time of Sargon the Great (c. 2334–2284 BC), but to the reign of Sargon II (722–705 BC), who lived well after the time the book of Exodus is believed to have been written. Additionally, in telling the story of Moses' infancy, the book of Exodus uses a number of terms that are clearly based on ancient Egyptian words (see Note 1) – showing that the Hebrew account was not influenced by a Mesopotamian one, but doubtless originated in Egypt. Actually, there are a number of similar stories from the ancient world – simply and sadly because infant abandonment was so commonly practiced – so there is no real reason to doubt the reality of the story in Exodus regarding the young Moses.

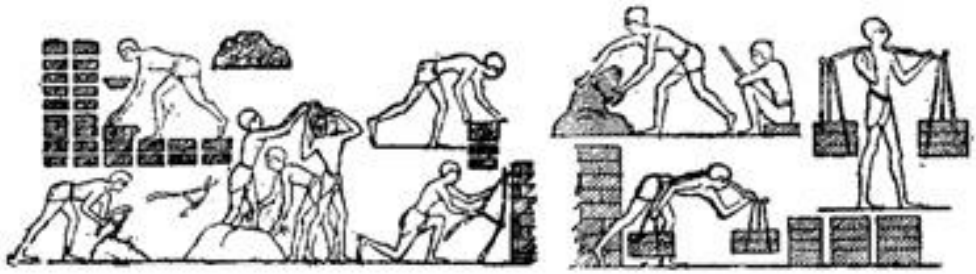
The name Moses, given to the infant by his adoptive princess mother (Exodus 2:10), is interesting. If it is understood as an Egyptian name (it is unlikely that the princess would have given him a Hebrew name), it would seem to represent a form of the Egyptian word *mes* "born of," or "child of." This word is found in many names of the New Kingdom (the time of Moses)

such as Ra-meses – "Born of Ra." Considering that Moses was found in the Nile, the Egyptian princess may have called the infant something like "X-meses" meaning "born of X" (X being one of the gods of the Nile), and Moses may have later dropped the pagan prefix from his name. In its Hebrew form, *moshe*, the name of Moses is similar to the Hebrew word for "to draw out," as we see in Exodus 2:10, and this verse seems to provide a meaning for the name that was understandable from either the Egyptian or Hebrew perspective.

Acts 7:22 tells us that Moses was educated in "all the wisdom of the Egyptians," and in recent years it has become apparent that in Moses' time special schools were associated with the royal palaces. Not only were the children of the Egyptian royalty educated there, but children of foreign dignitaries were also brought and educated alongside the young Egyptians in these schools. This enabled the Egyptians to "export" their own culture and values by way of the educated children they returned to their native areas, and also allowed children of elite Egyptian families to learn about other cultures and to better understand them. The young Moses could have learned a great deal there.

UNDERSTANDING THE TEXT:

When he reached adulthood, Moses is said to have spent time away from the palace observing the situation regarding the enslavement of his people, the Hebrews. When he saw one being beaten (the word implies in a possibly life-threatening manner), he killed the slave taskmaster and soon after fled to the area of Midian out of fear of punishment by the pharaoh (Exodus 2:11-15). Midian was in northern Arabia, quite distant from Egypt, but it was probably the closest area Moses could reach that was outside of Egyptian control and influence.



Slaves making bricks. Tomb of Rekhmire, c. 1460 BC, Thebes, Egypt.
Image: After Maspero.

This episode is sometimes said to be reminiscent of the ancient Egyptian "Tale of Sinuhe" that tells of a man who fled from Egypt fearing the anger of the Pharaoh and who lived with a tent-dwelling tribe, marrying the daughter of their chief, before eventually returning to Egypt to stand before the pharaoh. However, the absolute power of ancient monarchs meant that endangered individuals often had to flee to avoid royal persecution, and there are a number of stories of such events.

We see more aspects of Moses' character in the events occurring while he was in Midian, and it was while he was in that area that Moses experienced the appearance of God in the "burning bush" episode. Many natural explanations have been suggested for this phenomenon – ranging from bushes that might have exuded flammable gases to plants covered with brightly colored leaves. None of these explanations is convincing, and the simplest explanation is that the bush was burning, but miraculously not burning up – as Exodus tells us (Exodus 3:2-3).

The word used for "bush" in this incident is an unusual one, *seneh,* and its similarity to *sinai* in Hebrew is interesting, as that is the area where Moses was at this point (Exodus 3:1) – the burning bush and voice of God were a small foreshadowing of the fire and voice of God later revealed also at Sinai.

But in the smaller and more intimate conversation God had with Moses at this point, we learn a great deal both about Moses and about God. Speaking from the burning bush, God told Moses of his intention to rescue the Hebrews from slavery and to bring them into "a good and spacious land, a land flowing with milk and honey … So now, go. I am sending you to Pharaoh to bring my people the Israelites out of Egypt" (Exodus 3:8, 10).

Despite his reservations and excuses, Moses finally accepted God's call – though not before God gave him the miraculous signs such as the rod/serpent and the diseased/healed hand that he could use before the Israelites and Pharaoh (Exodus 4:1-9). But there are two particularly difficult passages in this section of Scripture that we need to understand. First, God told Moses:

> When you return to Egypt, see that you perform before Pharaoh all the wonders I have given you the power to do. But *I will harden his heart so that he will not let the people go*. Then say to Pharaoh, 'This is what the Lord says: Israel is my firstborn son, and I told you, "Let my son go, so he may worship me." But you refused to let him go; so I will kill your firstborn son.' (Exodus 4:21-23)

This matter of the hardening of Pharaoh's heart is mentioned twenty times in the book of Exodus. Sometimes it is said that Pharaoh hardens his own heart, but at other times – as here – Pharaoh's heart is said to be hardened by the Lord. The question arising from this is how God could punish Pharaoh and the Egyptians if it were God who had hardened his heart not to free the Israelites.

But it is likely that God chose to do this because he had already decided to punish the Egyptians as a result of their cruelty toward the Hebrew slaves and the widespread genocide they had enacted against the Hebrew children. In that sense, God "hardening" Pharaoh's heart would simply mean that God encouraged Pharaoh to maintain his own unwillingness to free the Israelites, even when he was tempted to let them go by the plagues God began to send.

The next difficult passage is not as easy to understand. As Moses goes on his way to Egypt, accompanied by his wife Zipporah and his sons, we read:

> At a lodging place on the way, the Lord met Moses and was about to kill him. But Zipporah took a flint knife, cut off her son's foreskin and touched Moses' feet with it. "Surely you are a bridegroom of blood to me," she said. So the Lord let him alone. (At that time she said "bridegroom of blood," referring to circumcision). (Exodus 4:24-26)

It is not made clear why God sought to kill Moses, but reading between the lines it seems that it was because he had failed to circumcise his son – as we must presume God had instructed him. Circumcision was a command given to Abraham and all his male descendants (Genesis 17:9-12) and was widely practiced in ancient Egypt and some, though not all, surrounding nations. But it would seem that Moses' Midianite wife had not wanted him to circumcise their son and only did so when it became apparent that Moses would be killed if they did not obey God's command.

Just as in the stories of the patriarchs, the description of Moses' life includes several very honest accounts of family dysfunctionality – incidents that show a certain degree of tension is always present – and perhaps unavoidable – within families. The unflattering honesty of this account is also a mark of the character of its author, Moses.

KEY THEOLOGICAL CONCEPTS:

The book of Exodus reveals a lot about the character of Moses. His many positive traits, such as his great patience, and especially his humility (see Numbers 12:3; etc.), are clear. But there can be a tension between proper humility and necessary confidence. We see this in the incident of the burning bush when Moses asked God: "Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh and bring the Israelites out of Egypt?" (Exodus 3:11). When he asked this question, God did not discuss Moses' qualifications with him, he simply said: "I will be with you" (Exodus 3:12). But then Moses continued: "Pardon your servant, Lord. I have never been eloquent … I am slow of speech and tongue…. Please send someone else" (Exodus 4:10, 13). Although this episode shows his extreme humility, Moses' reluctance to take on the task God gave him – perhaps mixed with a measure of fear of returning to Egypt – did not please God. We are told God became angry with Moses (Exodus 4:14) and gave three facts to discount Moses' excuses – facts that we can apply in our own calling.

First, God reminded Moses that he had already equipped him to do the job. God said to him: "Who gave human beings their mouths? Who makes them deaf or mute? Who gives them sight or makes them blind? Is it not I, the Lord?" (Exodus 4:11). We should all remember that God has already given us the basic ability to do what he calls us to do. Second, God told Moses: "Now go; I will help you speak" (Exodus 4:12). God also promises to make up any deficits we may have. Finally, God told Moses: "and [I] will teach you what to say" (Exodus 4:12). God even promises to do the work through us – if we will just go do it!

We also learn a lot about God through his interactions with Moses, especially in the burning bush episode. God spoke to Moses in this incident as "the God of your father[s], the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac and the God of Jacob" (Exodus 3:6 and see Acts 7:32), in which the word "God" is translated from the Hebrew word *Elohim* – the impersonal transcendent name of God we saw in the opening verses of Genesis. But Elohim was also a general word for god, as we also saw in Chapter 3, and that is why Moses said to God: "Suppose I go to the Israelites and say to them, 'The God of your fathers has sent me to you,' and they ask me, 'What is his name?' Then what shall I tell them?" (Exodus 3:13).

This probably does not mean that the Israelites did not know about God and needed to be told who he was, but that Moses, raised as an Egyptian, did not know God's name and was asking it in terms of his own credibility

with the Hebrews who might question him to test him. In either case, Moses was saying in effect, "I know you are God, but what is your name?" It was to this question that God answered: "I AM WHO I AM. This is what you are to say to the Israelites: 'I AM has sent me to you'" (Exodus 3:14).

God followed the statement, "I am who/what I am," or "I will be who/what I will be," as the Hebrew could be translated, by giving his personal name of imminence, Yahweh: "Say to the Israelites, 'The LORD [Yahweh], the God of your fathers – the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac and the God of Jacob – has sent me to you'" (Exodus 3:15). This seems to be the first Biblical usage of the name "Yahweh," (see Note 2), and we can see the great significance of this name in that God told Moses: "This is my name forever, the name you shall call me from generation to generation" (Exodus 3:15).

In the ancient world, a person's name was usually directly connected to the nature of the individual and, as a result, the names of gods were believed to hold their identities and were often kept secret (just as we might keep our identifying information and passwords secret nowadays). In Egypt, for example, the sun god Re had a hidden name known only to his daughter Isis, and in the Bible the divine being who wrestled with Jacob was unwilling to tell the patriarch his name (Genesis 32:24-29). In telling Moses his name, Yahweh, God not only revealed his name, but also his identity, and when God said "I am who/what I am," he was giving Moses an elaboration or clarification of the name Yahweh. We know this because in Exodus 3:14 God uses "I am" and "Yahweh" interchangeably.

The significance of the name Yahweh or "I am" is twofold. First, it shows God as the Self-Existent, Eternal God – which we know from the root meaning of the word. Second, it shows God as a relational being – which we know from the word's usage in the Bible. Yahweh is only used in the Old Testament when the writer is speaking about God's relationship with individuals or his people in general. A clear example of this is found in Psalm 19 where David uses the name Elohim in the first six verses of the psalm in speaking about God's interaction with the material world. Then, in the rest of the psalm, he uses the name Yahweh in discussing God's relationship with those who know him and who obey his laws.

Of all the events occurring in Moses' early life, the revelation of God's name Yahweh was the most important by far. It was the beginning of a more personal relationship between God and his people as we will see in the next chapter of this book.

* Note 1: An interesting example of this is the "basket" in which Moses was placed. The Hebrew word used in Exodus for this is *tebat* which derives from the Egyptian word for a "box" or "container." The only other place the word appears in the Bible is when Moses uses it for Noah's Ark – the two "arks" being used respectively to save Noah (along with his family) and Moses (and by extension, his family, the Hebrews) from destruction.

* Note 2: In Exodus 6:2-3 God says to Moses: "I am the Lord. I appeared to Abraham, to Isaac and to Jacob as God Almighty, but by my name the Lord [Yahweh] I did not make myself fully known to them." Yet the name Yahweh appears 162 times in Genesis and in 34 of these cases the name is used by the patriarchs themselves. But this need not be contradictory. It is possible that the patriarchs did not understand the name's meaning or significance; that they knew God but not to the degree that God revealed himself to Moses; or that the name was not known in the earlier period but because he knew God's name was Yahweh Moses wrote it retrospectively into the books he authored. An important point in favor of this last possibility is that in the early chapters of Genesis the name appears as "Yahweh Elohim" – in other words "the God Yahweh."

11. THE EXODUS

BACKGROUND AND PERSPECTIVES:

Although the Bible's description of Israel's exodus from Egypt shows it to have been an event of phenomenal proportions involving multiple miracles, it is nevertheless an event that is very difficult to establish historically and archaeologically. This is because ancient Egyptian historical records and inscriptions were highly propagandist and typically did not discuss military defeats and losses – only victories that showed the pharaohs in a positive light. There is also a comparable lack of archaeological evidence because even very large groups of people moving quickly through a landscape (as the Israelites did) leave virtually no archaeologically discernable "signature."

It is important to understand this background because sincere and well-meaning Christians often unknowingly perpetuate unauthenticated claims regarding archaeological "proof" of the exodus – such as chariot wheels being found in the Red Sea and similar "evidence." In reality, there is no hard evidence of the Israelite exodus, and trained archaeologists understand that none can really be expected. That does not mean that evidence could not come to light at some point, or that there is any reason to doubt that the exodus happened. But while archaeology cannot "prove" the exodus occurred, it can help throw light on some aspects of the story, and we will consider three such areas: the exodus plagues, the route of the exodus, and the date of the exodus.

The Ten Plagues:

Many people have attempted to find natural causes for the ten plagues – such as conditions that might follow an extreme flooding of the River Nile which can turn it reddish with particles of soil suspended in the water. In fact, there are Egyptian documents that describe the Nile as "blood" in such circumstances. But although such a scenario could possibly lead to infestations of frogs and various insects – and perhaps indirectly to disease, boils, and other pestilence – it could not account for a number of the plagues such as the hail, locusts, and darkness. Of course, no natural events could cause the death of only the firstborn throughout Egyptian society,

and so it makes sense to simply accept that God miraculously brought the plagues about through his own power and direct control of natural phenomena.

It is frequently said that each of the ten plagues was an attack on a particular Egyptian deity because God told Moses: "I will bring judgment on all the gods of Egypt" (Exodus 12:12 and see also Numbers 33:4), but the situation is not that simple. While some of the plagues utilized creatures associated with various Egyptian gods – such as the frogs which were symbols of the goddess Hekat – they tend to be only minor Egyptian deities, and a number of the plagues do not correspond with any particular Egyptian god or goddess. It is more accurate to say that the plagues brought "judgment" on *all* the gods of Egypt (as Exodus says) because they demonstrated God's power in a way that *all* the Egyptian gods together could not stop. In other words, the "judgment" on Egypt's deities was one of proving them not to be gods at all.

The plagues were actually far more an attack on Egypt's king than on its gods. This is because they made obvious the lack of Pharaoh's power to maintain order in his kingdom – which was an important aspect of Egyptian theology: that the king was himself a god invested with power to maintain *ma'at* or order and stability in the world. In Exodus 5:2 it is recorded that the Pharaoh disdainfully told Moses and Aaron: "Who is the Lord, that I should obey him and let Israel go? I do not know the Lord and I will not let Israel go." So it is not coincidental that at the culmination of the exodus at the Red Sea crossing, God said: "I will gain honor over Pharaoh and over all his army, that the Egyptians may know that I am the Lord" – with the expression of gaining honor "over Pharaoh" occurring three times (Exodus 14:4, 17-18).

The Route of the Exodus:

The Bible tells us that when the Israelites fled from Egypt, they were able to miraculously cross on dry ground through a large body of water that then returned and drowned the pursuing Egyptian forces. The Hebrew term often translated "Red Sea" in Exodus is *yam suph*. *Yam* means "sea," but *suph* means "reeds" or "rushes," which is why some versions of the Bible call it "the Sea of Reeds" or "Reed Sea" instead of the Red Sea. There are at least three likely possibilities for the location of this event: Some scholars believe the Israelites may have taken a northern route and that the sea they crossed was part of Lake Sirbonis, an inlet of the Mediterranean, though

there is little to substantiate this possibility. Other scholars feel that a central route that crossed one of the shallow lakes north of the Red Sea was more likely. This route agrees well with the very limited evidence we have, and with the name “Reed Sea.” Yet other biblical scholars favor the traditional view, that the Israelites took a southern route and crossed the northwest arm of the Red Sea itself – as popularized in films such as “The Ten Commandments.” We should remember that “Red Sea” is a modern name, however – the ancient Egyptians actually called this same body of water the "Green Sea."

Simplified map of the three main proposed routes for the exodus: yellow - northern route, red - central route, blue - southern route, green – common path shared by all routes. Base Image: NASA.

There are other, less likely, possibilities for the route of the exodus, but the wide range that is obvious in the main three theories shows the uncertainty of the situation. Also, much of the information we do have is susceptible to being understood in different ways. For example, Numbers 33:10 shows that the Israelites passed *yam suph* a second time as they headed south several days after the crossing, and this is sometimes believed to prove that only the Red Sea itself is large enough for that to have occurred. However, the description fits the chain of multiple lakes north of the Red Sea just as

well. Ultimately, we can only be sure that the Bible indicates the Israelites crossed a significant body of water on Egypt's eastern border. Exactly which body of water it was remains uncertain.

The Date of the Exodus:

The date of the exodus from Egypt is also the subject of ongoing debate. Although there are many theories, two principal dates have been suggested: an earlier one in the fifteenth century – in the reign of Pharaoh Thutmose III (1479 to 1425 BC) or Amenhotep II (1427 to 1401 BC) and a later one in the thirteenth century – in the reign of Rameses II (1279-1213 BC).

The earlier of these two dates has been especially favored by those biblical scholars who have attempted to work out a chronology from the Bible. However, this can be problematic because years are not given for some individuals, some figures seem to be symbolic or only approximations, there are often overlaps that are difficult if not impossible to separate, and the total number of years for a given period often differs between the Hebrew Masoretic text and the Greek Septuagint translation.

While some claim that only the Hebrew text is correct in this regard, the apostle Paul used the Septuagint figures in calculating the 430 years between the time of Abraham and the exodus (Galatians 3:17) – showing that the situation is not as clear cut as many would presume. While an earlier date for the exodus does seem to fit with some historical facts, it does not agree with others.

On the other hand, the later date seems to better fit some of the information we have regarding Canaan and especially Egypt. For example, Exodus 1:11 names two of the cities that the Israelite slaves labored to build – Pithom and Rameses. Egyptologists are virtually unanimous in agreeing that this city of "Rameses" was Pi-Rameses, built in the reign of Rameses II (1279–1213 BC), indicating the need for a later rather than an earlier date. Unlike biblical chronology, Egypt's chronology for the first and second thousand years BC is well established.

As a result, had the Bible named the pharaoh with whom Moses and Aaron interacted, the date of the exodus could be known within a few years. The fact that the Bible does not tell us who the pharaoh of the exodus was indicates that the precise date of the exodus is not important – rather it is what happened and what we can learn from the event that should be our focus.

UNDERSTANDING THE TEXT:

The exodus story begins with Moses and Aaron requesting from Pharaoh the temporary release of the Israelites in order to celebrate a religious festival in the wilderness. Ancient Egyptian laborers were given freedom from work for religious observances, so the request was a reasonable one. However, Pharaoh's negative response to Moses (see Note 1) led to the plagues by which the Egyptians were afflicted.

In understanding the plagues, it is helpful to realize that they are described in a specific pattern (see Note 2) of three groups – each consisting of three plagues – that are then followed by the final climactic plague:

First group of three plagues – Nile to "blood," frogs, gnats (Exodus 7:14-8:19)

Second group of three plagues – flies, pestilence, boils (Exodus 8:20-9:12)

Third group of three plagues – hail, locusts, darkness (Exodus 9:13-10:23)

The threefold pattern is made clear in the following manner: The first two plagues in each set of three are given *after a warning* and the third is sent *without any warning*. In each set the first plague is predicted to come "*in the morning*" while the next two plagues have *no specific time* mentioned. In each set God instructs Moses and Aaron to "*wait*" for the first plague, and to "*go to Pharaoh*" for the second plague, but there are *no instructions of location* for the third plague. In other words, each set of three plagues occurs in a fixed pattern with identical circumstances for the first, second, and third plagues, respectively. This subtly intricate pattern is reason enough to reject the claim sometimes made that the plagues account was just a number of stories of natural disasters pulled together to make a single story.

Understanding the pattern of three sets of plagues helps us to see their increase in intensity. The first three are serious annoyances, but relatively mild; the second three bring actual pain to the Egyptians; and the final set brings spectacular plagues affecting both people and the environment.

The final, tenth plague – the death of the Egyptian firstborn – stands alone and the fact that it was not included in a set of three plagues like all the previous afflictions indicates that it was equal to three of the earlier plagues in its severity. This plague was harsh indeed, yet God apparently felt the punishment was deserved in recompense for the killing of the Hebrew children. God also doubtless knew that such a punishment was necessary because the Egyptians would not let his people go until they were actually facing the death of their own people – as the failure of all the lesser plagues clearly demonstrates. It was on the night of the final plague and the deaths of the firstborn that the Israelites were instructed to keep the Passover ceremony – the high point of the exodus event – that will be discussed in detail below.

KEY THEOLOGICAL CONCEPTS:

The whole exodus story is summarized in a few short verses of Exodus 6, in the words that God told Moses to tell the people of Israel:

> "I am the Lord, and *I will bring you out* from under the yoke of the Egyptians. *I will free you* from being slaves to them, and *I will redeem you* with an outstretched arm and with mighty acts of judgment. *I will take you* as my own people, and *I will be your God*. Then you will know that I am the Lord your God, who brought you out from under the yoke of the Egyptians. And *I will bring you to the land* I swore with uplifted hand to give to Abraham, to Isaac and to Jacob. *I will give it to you as a possession*. I am the Lord." (Exodus 6:6-8, emphases added)

In this passage God makes a number of promises beginning with the words "I will …" In celebrating the Passover, Jewish people drink four small cups of wine – one for each of the first four things God said he would do – though there are seven instances of "I will" – seven promises – in this passage, and each one represents an important aspect of the theology of Exodus: *I will bring you out, I will free you, I will redeem you, I will take you as my own people, I will be your God, I will bring you to the land, I will give it to you.*

Within this important summary of the exodus story, "I will bring you out" and "I will free you" have spiritual dimensions in that the exodus out of Egypt (which the Bible uses as a metaphor for sin – Hebrews 11:24-25;

Revelation 11:8; etc.) symbolized the coming out of, and freedom from sin. In the same way, the word "redeem" in the promise "I will redeem you" means to buy back something that one had lost, but it can also mean to deliver someone or something from a bad or evil situation. God's redemption of the Israelites was manifested in that they were delivered from death in the final plague by the blood of the lamb they sacrificed for the ceremonial Passover meal eaten on the night prior to them leaving Egypt (Exodus 12:1-13). As such, the Passover account is certainly the theological high point of the exodus story from an Old Testament perspective, and it also takes on additional significance for Christians.

The Israelites were told to sacrifice a male lamb without blemish, meaning undefiled and perfect (Exodus 12:5). The connection between this perfect lamb and Jesus Christ, the Lamb of God (John 1:29) is made clear by the apostle Paul: "Christ our Passover Lamb has been sacrificed for us" (1 Corinthians 5:7) and the apostle Peter: "Knowing that you were not redeemed with corruptible things ... but with the precious blood of Christ, as of a lamb without blemish and without spot" (1 Peter 1:18-19).

The lamb had to be taken into the Israelites' homes on the tenth day of the first month of the Hebrew calendar and sacrificed on the fourteenth day – the days on which the New Testament tells us that Christ entered Jerusalem and was crucified, respectively (John 12:13 and John 13:1 – see Note 3).

The Israelites could eat the lamb only after it was roasted by fire and accompanied by unleavened bread and bitter herbs (Exodus 12:8). The roasting by fire symbolized the burnt offering (Leviticus 1:10-13) that Christ's sacrifice fulfilled. The unleavened bread symbolized that he was without sin (1 Corinthians 5:6-8). The herbs may picture the hyssop that was used to apply the blood of the Passover lamb to the Israelites' doorposts (Exodus 12:7, 13) – and it was hyssop that was used to give Jesus the bitter wine or vinegar on the cross (John 19:29).

The sacrificial lamb had to be completely consumed. Any uneaten part was to be totally burned up by fire (Exodus 12:10) so that no part of the lamb would be subject to decay or corruption – just as Christ's body was not corrupted in death (Acts 13:37).

There are many other symbolic aspects of the Passover event from a Christian perspective (see Note 4), but even the few examples given here show how the first Passover foreshadowed Christ's sacrifice and served as a lesson in substitutionary redemption. Christians believe, of course, that Jesus changed the symbols of the Passover ceremony to bread and wine at the Last Supper (Luke 22:13-20), but the symbolism of the first Passover

still applies to us today in giving us a deeper appreciation of Christ's sacrifice on our behalf. Just as the Passover ceremony and Christ's sacrifice are manifestations of God's promise, "I will redeem you," so all the promises of Exodus 6:6-8 have spiritual significance for Christians.

* Note 1: It is interesting that Moses did not say exactly what God told him to say when he met with Pharaoh (Exodus 3:18; 4:22-23). Moses was even instructed by God to say "please" at this first meeting with Pharaoh (Exodus 5:1). As a result, that meeting did not go well. The second time Moses went before Pharaoh, Moses followed God's instructions to the word (Exodus 7:10) and that meeting, although not successful in achieving its purpose, clearly went better. Things so often go better when we follow God's guidance to the word – rather than just generally!

* Note 2: The references to the plagues in Psalms 78 and 105 do not list all ten of the plagues enumerated in Exodus, and they are not given in the same order, but this is because the references in the Psalms are poetic rather than narrative. We see this in the way Psalm 78 mentions the Israelites wandering in the wilderness (vss. 13-33; etc.) before it mentions the plagues in Egypt (vss. 43-51).

* Note 3: The Jewish day begins at sunset; so according to Jewish reckoning, when Jesus ate the Passover meal with His disciples in the evening, it was the beginning of the Passover Day.

* Note 4: The Passover and exodus events are seen throughout the New Testament as symbolizing the death of Christ. For example, when Moses and Elijah appeared to the disciples on the Mount of Transfiguration and spoke of Jesus' approaching death (Luke 9:28–36), Luke used the Greek word "exodus" of his death. And in the book of Revelation, when the Redeemed sing, it is the song of Moses and the Lamb (Revelation 15:3). In fact, the New Testament has over thirty references to the Passover-exodus event, and over twenty of them occur in the narratives recording the end of Christ's life.

12. THE TEN COMMANDMENTS

BACKGROUND AND PERSPECTIVES:

The book of Exodus tells us that "In the third month, on the same day of the month that the Israelites had left the land of Egypt, they came to the Wilderness of Sinai ... and Israel camped there in front of the mountain" (Exodus 19:1). In Exodus the mountain is called Mt. Sinai, and in Deuteronomy it seems to be called Mt. Horeb, but in any event, it is unclear exactly which mountain the biblical story is describing. There are as many as a dozen peaks that have been suggested as likely candidates – ranging from several mountains in the Sinai Peninsula to others in northwestern Arabia. The mountain probably most often thought to represent the Mt. Sinai of Exodus is the 2,285-metre (7,497 ft) peak near the southern tip of the Sinai Peninsula traditionally known as Jebal Musa (Mount Moses).

Whichever mountain the biblical account references as Mt. Sinai, we are told that it was there that God gave the Ten Commandments to Moses inscribed on two tablets of stone (Exodus 20:1–17; 21:18). These commandments formed the legal basis of the great covenant made between God and the people of Israel – what Christians call the "old covenant" – and it is important to understand their role in this setting.

The Ten Commandments were not "normal" laws of their time and even went beyond the concept of law. In fact, the Bible nowhere calls them the ten "commandments" – the Hebrew calls them the ten *devarim* or "words" (just as the term Decalogue or "ten words" is often used of the commandments) and this is an expression with a wider meaning than just "commandments."

While we tend to think of the Ten Commandments in terms of "laws," they were much more than that. A number of "law codes" were proclaimed by rulers of ancient Near Eastern civilizations – such as the famous "code" of the Babylonian (Mesopotamian) king, Hammurabi (1754 BC). But these law codes almost all provided examples of "case law" in which legal cases were described and penalties recorded in the format "if a person does X, then the penalty must be Y." Unlike these basically inflexible examples of "casuistic" law, the Ten Commandments (and many of the laws found in the Old Testament) were formulated as "apodictic" laws, which simply state what must be done or not done, leaving the penalty for failure to obey

them to be decided by judges who would look at the circumstances involved in the case. This type of law was very rare in the ancient world and represented a huge development in the history of legal thought and actually forms the basis of much modern law.

Summarized Ten Commandments in Hebrew. Image: James Steidl

Although they were not like the laws of most ancient cultures, the Ten Commandments actually fit into the form of ancient contracts or treaties between nations. In the ancient Near East such international treaties were sealed by covenants that were formalized in a particular way. The dominant party – usually the great king making the treaty – first identified himself, then often enumerated what he had done to show his good intentions toward the other king or society. This was followed by a list of "stipulations" specifying what was expected on the part of those with whom the covenant was being made. There might also be a list of blessings or curses on the other party for keeping the covenant or failing to keep it. The Ten Commandments clearly fit into this kind of treaty covenant as we can see by noting the relevant sections of the biblical text with the corresponding sections of the treaty pattern:

Identification: "I am the Lord your God" (Exodus 20:2)

Benefits: "Who has brought you out of the land of Egypt…" (Exodus 20:2)

Stipulations: "You shall have no other god but me …" (Exodus 20:3)

Blessings and curses: (see Leviticus 26; Deuteronomy 28; etc.)

When we understand this background to the commands given at Sinai, we realize why, in addition to being Ten Commandments, they were also intended as "Ten Commitments" – a unique set of guidelines to a relationship with God (see Note 1).

A final background issue to keep in mind when studying the commandments is the fact that although the Hebrew does indeed call them the "ten," that is based on the units of text rather than the actual imperative "do's" or "don'ts." The Ten Commandments actually contain fourteen or fifteen imperative statements depending on how we count them. This fact has led to different ways of dividing the commandments – and, as a result, the numbers assigned to them.

For example, while according to Jewish as well as Orthodox, Anglican, Reformed, Evangelical, and most other Christian reckoning, the statements "You shall have no other gods before Me" (Exodus 20:3) and "Do not make an idol for yourself" (Exodus 20:4 CSB) are regarded as the first two commandments respectively, Roman Catholic and Lutheran tradition regards both of these statements to be part of the first commandment.

In a similar way, the statements "You shall not covet your neighbor's house" and "You shall not covet your neighbor's wife" (both found in Exodus 20:17) are regarded as parts of the same commandment by Jews and most Christians, while Roman Catholics and Lutherans regard them as separate commandments. Ultimately, it does not matter how we divide the commandments as long as they are all acknowledged, though the way they are divided does affect our understanding of them, as we will see in the next section.

UNDERSTANDING THE TEXT:

In this section we will look at the meaning and significance of each of the Ten Commandments (using the division and numbering most widely accepted by Jews and Christians as noted above):

1) Exodus 20:3: When God says that we must not have any gods "before" him, it does not mean that we must not place other gods in a higher position – the phrase "before me" means "in my presence." As God is everywhere, the first commandment means that we acknowledge only one God – monotheism – and in this it was unique in the ancient world. It was not uncommon in that age for people to worship one god, but to also accept many others (monolatry). But this commandment is about more than just the worship of "gods." As has been wisely said, it can apply to anything we elevate in place of God – such as material things, relationships, or even religion itself. The first commandment's insistence on monotheism also has far-reaching ethical implications. In fact, without monotheism morals are often seen as merely social conventions or individual preferences – as has largely happened in the modern world. The first commandment also provides the basis for all those that follow.

2) Exodus 20:4-6: Christians who believe this is a separate commandment feel that it cannot be referring to the same kind of idolatry as Exodus 20:3 for if it were, it would simply be repetition. Instead, they take the second commandment to mean that just as worship of false gods is wrong, so also is the worship of the true God by false means such as images (see also Deuteronomy 34:17). But whether we divide these commandments or treat them as one, the point of Exodus 20:4-6 is clearly that we are not to limit our conception of God by means of any physical thing that deflects our worship away from him and toward it. This command is unique in stressing punishment on the extended family of the worshiper for its violation and blessing on those who keep it – a mark of how seriously the command is to be taken.

3) Exodus 20:7: In Jewish tradition, this command was understood to mean that the personal name of God, "Yahweh," is too sacred to speak out loud, or in many cases, to write. Thus, Jews began to substitute the title Adonai, meaning "My Lord," or Elohim, meaning "God." In the Christian tradition the commandment has been viewed differently: it is not that the name itself is too sacred to be uttered (if so, why would it have been given?), but it is the misuse of the name of God – in any form – that is being prohibited. This understanding is based on the fact that the Hebrew translated "in vain" is literally "worthlessness," and the same Hebrew term can also be translated as "wickedness" or "evil" (for example, Job 11:11;

31:5). The spirit of the law explained by Christ would include the casual use of God's name as well as any form of blasphemy or cursing (Matthew 5:33-37). While punishment for breaking this command is mentioned, blessings for keeping it are not; it is viewed as a basic requirement.

4) Exodus 20:8-11: Observance of a Sabbath day as described in the fourth commandment is unique to the Bible and was not found in any other culture of the ancient world. It also included the only known command to grant servants, slaves, and even animals a day free from work. Although the text tells us God rested on the seventh day, it does not specifically command rest; rather, cessation from work. And rather than using the general Hebrew word for "work," Exodus 20:10 uses the more specific term *melachah* signifying work that creates or produces. In the New Testament Christ made this clear by showing that it is right to do good or to heal on the Sabbath (Matthew 12:11-13). The mention of God's activity also indicates that part of the reason for the Sabbath is to focus on the nature of God and our relationship with him as the Creator. Like the command to honor one's parents, this is one of only two in the Decalogue that is stated positively in the form "you shall …" And like that commandment, the fourth command, if not explicitly stating so, implies a blessing for keeping it (Exodus 20:11).

5) Exodus 20:12: The fifth commandment acts as a hinge between the commands regarding our relationship with God and our relationships with others. Although our parents are human, the biblical perspective is that when we are young, they act as representatives of God's authority. In cases where parents might command their children contrary to God's ways, they automatically relinquish the binding nature of their commands. That is what the apostle Paul meant in quoting this commandment and saying "Children, obey your parents in the Lord" (Ephesians 6:1) – meaning insofar as the parental commands are in harmony with the law of God. But under normal circumstances, we first learn to obey and submit to God by obeying and submitting to our parents. When we are older, the command to "honor" them continues to work both negatively and positively: to prohibit any kind of action such as the cursing or striking of parents, and to promote actions such as helping and caring for them.

6) Exodus 20:13: Like English, the Hebrew language has two different words for the taking of life: *harag* ("to kill") and *ratsach* ("to murder"). It

is *ratsach* that is used in the commandment. As such the command has nothing to do with issues such as capital punishment, pacifism, or animal rights. If this commandment forbade killing of any kind, the offering of animal sacrifices that God commanded would have been wrong, as would be killing in self-defense or the defense of another person, and no war would ever be justified, no matter how evil the aggressor or the genocide being committed. In all these cases the Bible shows that killing is not always wrong (Exodus 21:12-14; 22:2; etc.), but the sixth commandment is unequivocal in showing that the deliberate taking of an innocent human life (at any stage of that life) is murder. In the Sermon on the Mount Jesus expanded this basic definition to condemn the anger, hatred, despising, and other mental precursors that eventually lead to murder or a murderous attitude (Matthew 5:21-24).

7) Exodus 20:14: Because the family was the foundation of society, adultery was condemned as far back as the era when polygamy was accepted in ancient Israel. Even the pagan societies around Israel understood this. Adultery was called "the great sin" in a number of ancient Near Eastern cultures, as it was considered to be extremely detrimental to society and ultimately characteristic of anarchy. Jesus extended the concept of marital faithfulness by showing that adultery can be an attitude as well as an action (Matthew 5:27-28). This obviously condemns not only lust, but in our own society, a great deal of music and entertainment as well as pornography of any kind. The ancient Greek translation of Exodus 20:17 and both the Hebrew text and the Greek translation of Deuteronomy 5:21 all place "you shall not covet your neighbor's wife" before "you shall not covet your neighbor's house."

8) Exodus 20:15: The eighth commandment, "You shall not steal," may seem at first sight to apply only to items of tangible property, but in reality, the command is much broader in its possible applications. In addition to forbidding the taking of items that are not ours, it also includes problems as diverse as cheating (which invariably steals something from someone else), human trafficking and kidnapping (stealing someone's freedom), and even denigration (the stealing of someone's dignity and self-respect). Although we might not think of it as stealing, not giving help and aid to people in genuine need when it is within our power to do so also comes within the spirit of this law.

9) Exodus 20:16: Like the previous one, the ninth commandment is surprisingly broad in its possible applications. Although its literal wording applies to the giving of false witness in legal contexts (the setting in which lying can often cause the most irreparable damage), the prohibition also has other aspects. Slander, libel, and any form of character assassination (including much "harmless" gossip) are also covered in principle by this commandment. Ultimately, while the earlier commandments focus on protecting people in personal and direct ways, this prohibition is about not hurting people in social contexts.

10) Exodus 20:17: In the ancient Near East the principle of wanting something that is not rightfully ours (often referred to as "lifting the eyes" toward something) was socially disapproved of, but the Ten Commandments are the only laws that have forbidden this often undetectable and essentially unprovable crime. All the other commandments may be kept – or broken – in thought, speech, and action, but the tenth is unique in focusing on the mind as the origin of, and only potential barrier to, sin. Just as it is often said that the first commandment includes all the others, it is probably not exaggeration to say that the last commandment, if it is kept, stops us from breaking all the others. It has been said that we are not prohibited from wanting similar items to what our neighbor has – just prohibited from wanting *what* our neighbor has; but the New Testament also develops the principle of controlling desires – and, when possible, of being content with what we have (1 Timothy 6:6).

KEY THEOLOGICAL CONCEPTS:

The importance and application of the Ten Commandments have been viewed in varying ways in different branches of Christianity. Generally speaking, the Catholic and Orthodox Churches teach that the Ten Commandments are still obligatory for Christians. Reformed Christians likewise view the commandments as continuing under the new covenant, as do Anglicans, Methodists, and a majority of other Christians. Lutherans and some others, while teaching that a "distinction between the Law and the Gospel is to be maintained in the Church," accept the application of the Ten Commandments today. A minority of Christians believe that the commandments no longer apply to believers as they feel we are completely "under grace rather than law." The view of most Christians – that the

principles found in the Ten Commandments are still applicable today – is based on one or more of the following reasons:

A widely accepted understanding is that there are three types of laws found in the Old Testament: ceremonial, civil, and moral. The New Testament clearly teaches that the ceremonial ("ritual" or "sacrificial") laws foreshadowed Christ and came to an end at his death (Hebrews 9:11-14). The civil laws were given for the regulation of the physical nation of ancient Israel and likewise no longer apply because the Church is not a physical nation and the conditions extant at the time of ancient Israel no longer exist. Most of the principles found in the moral law as summarized in the Ten Commandments can be seen before the commandments were given at Sinai, however, and are also seen throughout the New Testament.

That is why, for example, the apostle Paul draws a clear distinction between the ritual laws of the Old Testament and the spiritual or moral laws in verses such as this: "Circumcision is nothing and uncircumcision is nothing. Keeping God's commands is what counts" (1 Corinthians 7:19).

Another way of looking at this situation is that the underlying principles of all the laws found in the Old Testament apply to us because they all teach us something about love for God and neighbor. All the hundreds of laws of the Old Testament can be summarized by the Ten Commandments, which can themselves be summarized by two, that we should: "love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind .... and you shall love your neighbor as yourself" as Jesus affirmed (Matthew 22:37–40). Jesus certainly transformed the Ten Commandments, but he did not do away with them (Matthew 5:17), and the apostle Paul confirms this understanding (Ephesians 6:1-2; etc.).

Yet another view of the importance of the commandments is found among those who believe that even if the law of Moses, including the Ten Commandments, has ended, this does not mean that one can worship idols, take God's name in vain, disobey parents, steal, kill, commit adultery, or do other things that the commandments condemn. Because at least nine of the laws enumerated in the Decalogue are found in New Testament books written after the death of Christ, they should be obeyed today.

Whatever our own background may be, it is important to remember that for many centuries, basic instruction in the Christian Church has been based on the Ten Commandments. Their principles are of continuing importance (see Note 2), and although as Christians we should not strive to obey them from the wrong motivation and for the wrong reasons (the New Testament shows that God's gift of salvation is not the reward for our

obedience, but the reason for it), the principles of the commandments apply as much now as when they were given. As one respected Christian pastor and scholar has recently stated, "The Ten Commandments have been central to God's people in the Old Testament, central to God's people in the New Testament, central to God's people throughout church history, and they should be central for us as well" (see Note 3).

* Note 1: The introduction to the commandments also echoes God's call to Abraham: "I am the LORD who brought you out from Ur of the Chaldeans" (Genesis 15:7), "I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt" (Exodus 20:2) – showing a similar beginning of a new era of God's working with humanity.

* Note 2: Winston Churchill called the ethical system summarized by the Ten Commandments "a system of ethics which, even if it were entirely separated from the supernatural, would be incomparably the most precious possession of mankind, worth in fact the fruits of all wisdom and learning put together." (*The Illustrated Sunday Herald*, 8 February 1920).

* Note 3: Kevin DeYoung, *The Ten Commandments: What They Mean, Why They Matter, and Why We Should Obey Them* (Crossway, 2018). Dr. DeYoung (PhD, University of Leicester) is senior pastor of Christ Covenant Church in Matthews, North Carolina, board chairman of The Gospel Coalition, and assistant professor of systematic theology at Reformed Theological Seminary (Charlotte).

13. COVENANT AND TABERNACLE

BACKGROUND AND PERSPECTIVES:

Beginning in Exodus 24 we find the establishment of God's covenant with ancient Israel and also a detailed description of the tabernacle that was to be constructed as a portable sanctuary. Archaeological background helps to illuminate both of these important aspects of Israel's relationship with God.

The Covenant:

Skeptics once claimed that Moses (most likely to be dated c. 1300-1200 BC) could not have recorded the words of the covenant that the Bible explicitly says he wrote down (Exodus 24:4) because they presumed that Semitic peoples did not have phonetic writing until long after Moses' time. However, due to archaeological discoveries made in recent years, we now know that the phonetic writing of Semitic languages existed from well before the time of Moses – perhaps as early as 1900-1800 BC.

Interestingly, it is in Sinai and its surrounding regions that the earliest known writing of this type (the "proto-Sinaitic" scripts) has been found. Every alphabet in the world is ultimately derived from these early scripts, which were far simpler than earlier complex writing systems (such as Egyptian hieroglyphs) and allowed most people to be able to read.

In the last chapter we saw that the structure of the Ten Commandments shows similarities with ancient covenant treaties, and we will look at those treaties more closely now because the whole covenant God made with Israel was given in that way – like legal agreements between a great king who promised his support and protection to a group of people who promised to be loyal to him.

The form of such ancient Near Eastern covenants changed somewhat through time, but in the period in which Moses lived they included six essential aspects. These may all be seen in the following examples from a Hittite document (the Treaty of Muwatallis II with Alaksandus of Wilusa, c. 1280 BC) and from the reaffirmation of the Mosaic covenant in the Bible in the book of Deuteronomy (see Note 1):

An Example of Near Eastern and Biblical Covenant Parallels

1. *Introduction of the Covenant-Maker* –
"These are the words of Muwatallis … King of the land of Hatti"
(§ 1, I. B 1–2)
"These are the stipulations, decrees and laws Moses gave"
(Deuteronomy 4:45).

2. *Historical Prologue* –
"When, in former times my grandfather attacked the land of Wilusa, he conquered [it]" (§ 2, I. B 2–8)
"When they came out of Egypt … They took possession of … the land" (Deuteronomy 4:45, 47).

3. *Stipulations* –
"You, Alaksandus, shall protect the [king] as a friend!"
(§ 6, I. A 65–7)
"You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart"
(Deuteronomy 6:5 ESV).

4. *Publication of the Covenant* –
"let someone read this tablet which I have made for you three times each year" (§ 19, III. 73–4)
"you shall read this law before them in their hearing"
(Deuteronomy 31:11).

5. *Invocation of the Gods* –
"The Sun god of heaven … the Sun goddess … the Weather-god"
(§ 20, IV. 1–30)
"the LORD, the God of your ancestors"
(Deuteronomy 27:3).

6. *Blessings and Curses* –
"If you … break the words of this document … then may these oaths destroy you and … your seed from the face of the earth. But if you keep these words, then may the thousand gods … keep you" (§ 21, IV. 31–46)
"If you fully obey the LORD your God and carefully follow all his commands … all these blessings will come on you… if you do not obey the LORD your

God and do not carefully follow all his commands … all these curses will come on you" (Deuteronomy 28:1-2, 15).

These parallels are not just interesting similarities – they help us understand many of the things said about the covenant in the Old Testament and help us recognize the significance of the language used in its description.

Other language used in the Mosaic covenant is based on ancient contracts of a more limited and intimate type – for example, marriage and adoption contracts or covenants. In the marriage contracts of some of the cultures of the biblical period, the groom stated, "She is my wife, and I am her husband;" and in adoption contracts the father might announce "I will be his father… he shall be my son."

These were not just affirmations of the obvious, but key statements sealing the covenant or contract – and are virtually identical in form to the words we find God speaking to Israel "I … will be your God, and you shall be my people" (Exodus 6:7; Leviticus 26:12; etc.) in adopting Israel (Exodus 4:22; Deuteronomy 8:5; 14:1).

When these and many other similarities are brought together, we see that God clearly used the legal forms of Moses' day in order to make a binding relationship with his people – just as we saw he did centuries earlier in establishing his covenant with Abraham. Being aware of the legal forms and their significance can give us a far better appreciation of what the covenant meant to the people of that time.

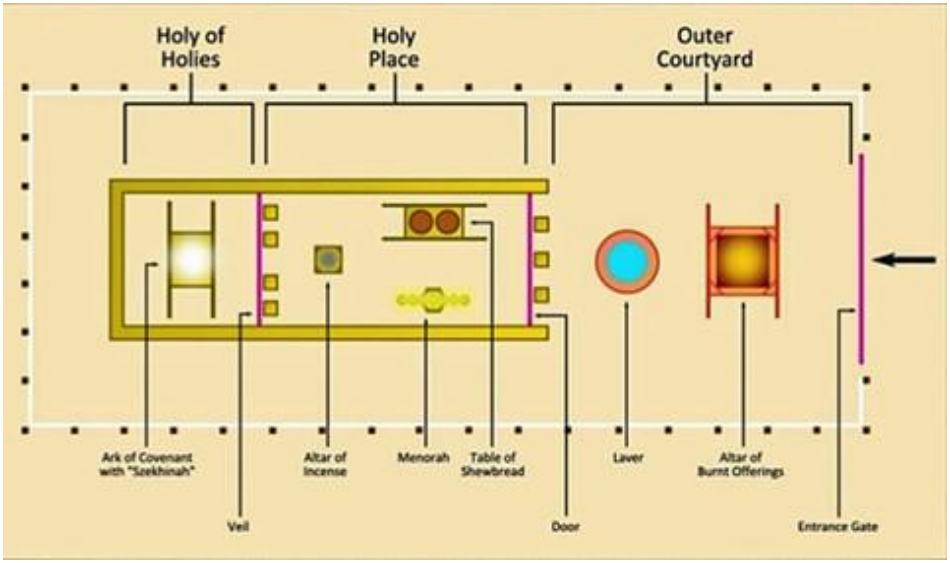
The Tabernacle:

The tabernacle, together with its sacrifices and other rituals, was much more closely related to the covenant than might at first appear. The relationship between them is seen in several ways.

First, we should realize that rather than being a place of communal worship like modern religious buildings, the tabernacle functioned like the temples of the world at that time – as an enclosed, private sanctuary for the presence of God and as an ongoing expression of Israel's covenant responsibility to him.

The tripartite format of the tabernacle – of outer courtyard, "holy place," and inner "most holy place" or "holy of holies" (see the illustration below) – followed the standard form of Egyptian temples. In both cases, each of the three areas was progressively more restricted and the innermost

area was accessible to the high priest only. In both cases the outer area was open to the sky and the inner areas become progressively more private and darkened. Both Egyptian temples and the tabernacle were designed with an east-west (sunrise to sunset) orientation that stressed the continuous and ongoing nature of the daily sacrifices and the maintaining of relationship with the gods/God.



Plan of the Wilderness Tabernacle. Image: Slideshare

Many items of the furniture of the tabernacle also reflect those of Egyptian temples, from the altar of burnt offerings (of an Egyptian pattern) and the laver (like the purification pool in many Egyptian temples), to the innermost shrine. In Egypt, this is where the god lived; and in the case of the tabernacle, the innermost portable shrine – the ark of the covenant – also directly signified God's presence with Israel. In Egypt, winged deities guarded shrines in the same manner that the cherubim guarded Israel's ark.

There are many other similarities between Israel's tabernacle and the actual temples and mythological homes of the gods of surrounding nations at that time (see Note 2). These parallels show that although God was revealing himself to Israel as being completely different from the gods of that world, he also provided a means for Israel to covenant with him and worship him in ways that were familiar to them.

UNDERSTANDING THE TEXT:

Exodus 24 describes the formal acceptance by the people of Israel of the covenant God had initiated with them. This occurred in a number of steps. First: "Moses went and told the people all the Lord's words and laws, they responded with one voice, 'Everything the Lord has said we will do.' Moses then wrote down everything the Lord had said" (vss. 3-4). After the wording of the covenant had been explained to the people and their verbal acceptance of it had been recorded, Moses then erected an altar and twelve stone pillars as the next part of the covenant initiation ceremony. The altar and pillars represented the presence of God and the twelve Israelite tribes, respectively. Such stone pillars were commonly set up in the ancient biblical world as a memorial or witness to agreements (Genesis 31:45-54; etc.).

Next, we are told that Moses read out the "book of the covenant" and the people responded, "We will do everything the Lord has said; we will obey" (vs. 7). As we saw above, Near Eastern treaties from the same period of history likewise included a public reading of the text of agreements made. In Israel's case, the people's response is interesting as on the surface it seems to repeat the same idea: 1) to do everything God said, and 2) to obey. However, the Hebrew is literally "to do everything … and to *hear*" and means "to do everything and to understand." It has sometimes been said that this order reflects a truth of life – we often have to do what God tells us before we understand the reasons for the command.

Exodus tells us that after sacrificing animals and splashing their blood on the altar, "Moses then took the blood, sprinkled it on the people and said, 'This is the blood of the covenant that the Lord has made with you in accordance with all these words'" (vs 8). As splashing the blood on all the people would be difficult if not impossible, the blood splashed "on the people" was probably on the twelve stones that represented them (the other half being splashed on the altar representing God). In any event, the sealing of the covenant with blood in this manner was an important final step in the process and helps us to understand why the New Testament tells us the new covenant was "sealed" with the blood of Christ (Luke 22:20).

After the covenant-making proceedings were concluded, we are told that Moses spent forty days (see Note 3) on Mount Sinai being instructed by God in all the details of how to build the tabernacle that was to be the portable sanctuary for God (Exodus 25:1-9). Nearly all the information on the structure of the tabernacle is repeated in the final chapters of Exodus.

This is because the earlier chapters (Exodus 25-31) describe God's instructions about *how* to construct the tabernacle, and the later chapters (Exodus 35-40) describe the tabernacle's actual construction. There may be an important lesson in what may seem like simple repetition in these chapters – that our fulfillment of God's commands must be exactly, not approximately, what he tells us. Nevertheless, more chapters are devoted to the tabernacle and the details of its construction and functioning than to any other subject in the five books of Moses – showing the great importance of the portable sanctuary, beyond just its physical details.

Each part of the tabernacle's construction symbolically showed something about God or mirrored an aspect of the creation. To take a very simple example, when we look carefully at the materials from which the different areas of the structure were to be made, we find that the items of the outer area were made of copper, in the next area of silver, and in the holy of holies (the innermost chamber symbolizing God's presence) they were made of gold. In this way the increase in beauty and worth the closer one moved toward God's presence was taught to the Israelites in a practical but unforgettable way. In a similar manner, many scholars believe that the menorah, the seven-branched candlestick situated along the southern wall in the darkened inner part of the tabernacle, represented the seven moving luminaries visible to the naked eye (the Sun, Moon, Mercury, Venus, Mars, Jupiter, and Saturn) that cross the southern sky, giving continuous light, night and day, that symbolized the eternal light of God himself.

KEY THEOLOGICAL CONCEPTS:

Christianity teaches that God's covenant with ancient Israel was a foreshadowing of the new covenant that would be established in Jesus Christ (Hebrews 8:8-13). While most Christians understand this, it is very common for believers to therefore disregard the Mosaic or old covenant as purely Jewish in nature and extent. But in reality, the old covenant has much to teach us – both of itself, and in terms of our understanding the new covenant. For example, the fact that the old covenant involved the adoption of ancient Israel to "sonship" (Exodus 4:22; Deuteronomy 8:5; 14:1; etc.) is stressed in the New Testament by the apostle Paul (Romans 9:4) and is the basis of what he says about Christian adoption as sons and daughters of God (Romans 8:15; Ephesians 1:5; Galatians 4:5).

At its heart, in fact, the old covenant is not greatly different from the new in terms of its goals and purposes, but as Christians we tend not to see that

because of the physical rituals that might seem to obscure the similarity. Yet if we look closely, Moses himself stressed the underlying essence of the old covenant that was of greater importance than the physical rites it involved. Take, for example, the words of Moses regarding the role of circumcision and the greater purpose that underlay it: "The LORD your God will circumcise *your hearts* and the hearts of your descendants, *so that* you may love him with all your heart and with all your soul, and live" (Deuteronomy 30:6, emphases added).

It is easy to presume that the old covenant stressed law and the new one stresses love, but verses like this show that within the old covenant, love was precisely what God called Israel to (see also Deuteronomy 6:5; 10:19; etc.). All the moral commandments within that covenant simply clarified how love should be expressed. The covenant administered through Moses called for life-encompassing love, and Christians today are not given a different *goal*, but the help of Jesus Christ in fulfilling the same one.

The tabernacle also tied directly to the goal of love in the old covenant because God gave the people the opportunity to express their love in their sacrifices and also in the tabernacle's construction: "Tell the Israelites to bring me an offering. You are to receive the offering for me from everyone whose heart prompts them to give" (Exodus 25:2). Normally, God gives commandments we must keep whether we want to do so or not. But when it comes to our giving to God – even if it is commanded – God wants only what we *want* to give to him in an expression of our love. The love that God called for was, of course, reciprocal. And we even see that in the construction of the tabernacle: "They are to make a sanctuary for me so that I may dwell among them" (Exodus 25:8 CSB). We would expect this verse to read, "They are to make a sanctuary for me so that I may *dwell in it"* – but God's desire was not for somewhere to live, but somewhere for his presence to be manifested among the people he loved.

Israel met God at Sinai in a tangible manner, but his people could not stay there – they were called to move on – and the tabernacle became the place where the nation's encounter with the divine could take place on a regular basis. It was made to house not just the presence of God, but also his ongoing revelation of himself to them, as they traveled to the promised land.

* Note 1: Note that the citations from Deuteronomy are from various parts of the book. The same is true of the citations from the Hittite document. The essential elements of covenants of this type might have other material interspersed between them in the ancient texts – they just needed to be present in the document for the

covenant or contract to be valid. However, in both the biblical and other ancient documents of this type, the essential elements almost always occur in the same order.

* Note 2: For example, in ancient Canaanite texts the dwelling place of the chief Ugaritic god is frequently said to be a tent, and the term used for his dwelling was *mashkan* which is almost identical to the Hebrew word for the tabernacle: *mishkan*. The deities of several Near Eastern societies were said to have such portable tent-shrines or tabernacles.

*Note 3: The number forty is frequently used in the Old Testament to represent the completion of an approximate period of time – for example, a generation (Genesis 25:20) or the rule of a judge (Judges 3:11). The frequency with which this number is used and the lack of specific close numbers such as thirty-eight or forty-three indicates that forty was often used to show a general rather than a precise period of time.

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