

EXODUS 1:1 — 2:10

Genesis 50:22–26; Psalm 105:24,25; Acts 7:17–22; Hebrews 11:22–23

THE BABY MOSES

Story Notes

File no. 24

Exodus is the story of Israel's birth as a nation. It fulfilled promises made to Abraham that God would make of him a great nation. Here was a people in whom God would reveal his power, with a view to blessing all the nations.

The national history of the people of God began with Moses and Israel but it was brought to fullness when Jesus died and rose again, to set his people free — people from all nations.

Exodus 1:1–22

God's blessing (expressed in vigorous growth in numbers) was unstoppable, and caught the attention of the Egyptians among whom Israel lived. On the other hand, the anxious nationalism of Egypt was expressed in repression and then genocide.

Exodus 2:1–10

In this most improbable and threatening of circumstances, Moses was born, protected and brought up as a grandson of Pharaoh.

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EXODUS 2:11 — 4:31

Acts 7:22–29; Hebrews 11:24–26

MOSES RUNS AWAY / BURNING BUSH

Story Notes

File no. 25

Exodus 2:11–25

Moses' identity, and the promises under which his own nation lived, must have been conveyed to him in his infancy. The Spirit of God stirred his heart because he chose to be linked with the people of promise rather than with those who had power (see Heb. 11:23–26). His early attempts to help were not appreciated (Acts 7:23–29), and Moses himself seemed unprepared for opposition. It was not yet God's time. Moses sank into a comfortable obscurity in the land of Midian and it would seem that the opportunity for Israel to be saved had gone. But when God heard Israel's cry, he remembered his covenant and action began.

Exodus 3:1–22

God revealed himself to Moses in a flame of fire and a piece of desert sand became holy ground. He was the God of Moses' forefathers. He was now to be known as 'I AM', the God who lives forever and does whatever he chooses. He told Moses what he would do, and what Moses should do. God would keep his promise to the fathers and have pity on his people. He would perform miracles in Egypt to arouse the faith of his people and to loosen the grip of Pharaoh. Moreover, God would be with Moses. In the face of this favour and power, Moses remained unwilling to be used, so much so that he aroused the anger of God.

Exodus 4:1–31

None of this altered the purpose of God. Every complaint Moses made was met with a further resource from God to help him. Then, after this intense encounter, Moses said goodbye to his in-laws. He travelled back to Egypt and was met by his brother who would be his 'mouth'. Wonderfully, Israel believed and Moses could see that God was doing what he said he would do. On the way back to Egypt, God revealed his relationship to his people. They were his son. God's jealous love for his people would outdo any rival. God also revealed his insistence on the holiness of his people. They were his and must bear the mark of his covenant with them (Gen. 17:9–14).

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EXODUS 5:1 — 10:29

Exodus 11:1 Psalm 105:26–35

‘LET MY PEOPLE GO’

Story Notes

File no. 26

Exodus 5

Pharaoh didn't know the Lord and wanted to establish his own kingdom. Therefore, he repressed the Israelites who were being blessed by God. Israel had called on God and things became worse. Perhaps they realised that they would never have a home in Egypt. Moses had seen that God was holy, both when he saw the burning bush and when God insisted that he circumcise his son. He had no doubt that if God commanded Israel to worship him, they would suffer if they did not do as he said. On the other hand, Moses was grieved and complained to God about the uselessness of his visit to Pharaoh.

Exodus 6

God's reply to Moses was to reveal more of himself and his purpose. God was remembering his covenant with the patriarchs, and there was something new to be revealed to Moses. He should not be limited to what he already knew. The time for God's judgement on the Egyptians, and later, the Amorites, had come. The time for God to reveal himself living among his people on a world stage had come. Although Moses was still unduly aware of his own limitations, Israel was being drawn on by the command and by the fear of God.

While the name Yahweh (LORD) had been used in the Genesis narrative, it now appears that this was transposing back what was known of God from this later time. The narrators thought this was the appropriate name to use because it was Yahweh that created the earth and blessed Abraham — though the fullness of that name would not be known without the exodus.

Very soon, the tribe of Levi would distinguish themselves as zealous for God and would be set apart for priestly duty, but already, God had these two Levites, Moses and Aaron, ready for work.

Exodus 7

If Moses previously wondered how his words could achieve all God said would happen, there was no need for concern. Deliverance would come by God's mighty works.

God hardened Pharaoh's heart, but then, Pharaoh had hardened his own heart and would be judged for it. There is no will of man, good or evil, which is outside the greater will of God, and this remains one of the mysteries we cannot resolve.

The sign God had given Moses in the wilderness, the sign by which Israel had come to trust him, was now copied by Pharaoh's magicians (perhaps by trickery). The first plague was also rejected, but the terrible ruining of the country had begun.

Exodus 8

With the second plague, magicians could duplicate the problem but not the solution and Pharaoh was obligated to negotiate with Moses. But then, he hardened his heart again. God's purpose was not just that his people be freed but that Egypt would know him, the living God. With the third plague, magicians could not fake gnats and told Pharaoh they were dealing with God. Pharaoh hardened his heart each time showing us that this was not his fate but his on-going choice. With the fourth plague, God miraculously spared his people, but Egypt was ruined. Pharaoh now had no reason to doubt that God was at work but still tried to negotiate for Israel not to leave the land. Egypt's quest was for their own power. Israel had been called to worship God without hindrance. This, God would secure.

Exodus 9

The next two plagues did not make Pharaoh change at all. Although he discovered Israel was unaffected by stock loss, and his magicians could not present themselves because of boils, his heart remained hard, or, the Lord made him unable to change. In later times, God gave hardness of heart to his own people to prevent their arrogance and to open up the possibility of faith in God's mercy (Rom. 11:8, 17–24).

'LET MY PEOPLE GO' con't

With the hail, God's plagues hit Pharaoh more personally (v. 14). God could have ruined him straight away but he wanted to make his name known through his patience with his rival (Rom. 9:22–23). Although the severity of the trial brought Pharaoh to say he acknowledged God, Moses could see that while one sign of hope remained, Pharaoh would not relent.

Exodus 10

Threat of locusts made Pharaoh's officials plead with him to change his mind, and they marvelled that he couldn't see the ruin of their country. They did not understand the power of God hardening someone's heart. Pharaoh would do anything to preserve himself and his reign. Then, darkness on the land meant that nothing could be done about repairing the disaster. This brought Pharaoh to offer a concession, but he still held the reins. So his opposition to Moses and God was total. The way of negotiation was closed.

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EXODUS 11:1 — 12:42

Exodus 3:21–22; Psalm 105:36

THE PASSOVER NIGHT

Story Notes

File no. 27

All peoples needed to observe and fear as they saw God speaking to and setting his people free. The blessing they needed for their own life would be available to them as they blessed Israel and the God of Israel.

We should always remember that God has compassion on the nations and, through saving his people, reveals his nature and his purpose to bring salvation to all nations.

Nine different plagues had come on Egypt, all of them by God's word. These revealed the power and the purpose of God to save his people. Now the contest of man against God came to its finale which God had outlined at the beginning — my 'son' Israel must be set free to worship me, or your son will die.

Egypt's people and government now saw Moses as having executive authority in the country, and the Hebrews as people to be served rather than treat as slaves. God had established the greatness of his name in the blessing of his people. Now God made an ultimate distinction between his people and those who were not his people.

Israel was distinct from all other nations, but not because they were better than any other nation. If they were to be 'passed over' when the angel of death visited, preparations had to be made. A lamb was to be killed, its blood sprinkled around the house's door, its flesh eaten. These were signs of something to come but were a sign to keep the angel of death at bay.

The Feast of Passover and the Feast of Unleavened Bread are spoken of together. In times to come, the latter feast would follow on for 7 days after the Passover (Exod. 12:11, 15; 34:18, 25). In the New Testament, they are regarded as one event (Matt. 26:17; Mark 14:1; Luke 22:1).

It was God who made this distinction between the world and his people. It was his offering that prevented wrath falling on the homes of his people. This was to be the beginning of their new history, and an on going remembrance through their years. On that night, they did not have opportunity to put yeast in their bread, and, to remember this fact, their annual festival was to include no food made with yeast. This was later interpreted as a sign of separation from evil (Matt. 16:6; I Cor. 5:6–8).

So, the congregation of Israel was formed. They were a people created by God's saving deed, distinguished by their reliance on the sacrifice provided by God, and separated from dependence on the powers of this world.

In this ancient event, God prepared his people for the exodus to be effected by his Son at the cross (Luke 9:31). He foreshadowed the sprinkling of Christ's blood which would save us from the wrath to come (Rom. 5:9), and anticipated his enthronement as Lord over all our enemies. He prepared us for our radical separation from this world and its sin — so that we would have no hope other than the living God and his grace (Phil. 3:3).

EXODUS 13:17 — 15:21

Exodus 13:1–16; Psalm 105:37–39

CROSSING THE RED SEA

Story Notes

File no. 28

Exodus 13

Israel was leaving Egypt when God told Moses that all their first-born belonged to him. It was the death of Pharaoh's (and Egypt's) firstborn that finally moved him to release the Israelites. The Israelites were grateful because their own sons had been 'passed over' or spared. This was the opportunity for God to tell them who they were — the 'my son' nation. They were to keep the festival of unleavened bread that commemorated this. God's ownership of animals was expressed by sacrificing the firstborn of each animal. Sacrifice of humans, from Abraham's time, was prohibited, and so God's ownership of Israel was to be expressed by the redemption of the firstborn with an animal (and later, also, with the service of the Levites). That is, an animal would die in place of each firstborn son. As this was done, and as it was explained to the firstborn sons, Israel would begin to appreciate the power of blood spilt instead of theirs. Each generation would be tutored in the power of redemption by blood.

We are not told that Israel ever chose to leave Egypt. God was concerned that they would change their minds unless he led them in a way that would bind them to him. Israel was ready for battle but the battle would be God's. He was personally with them in the fire and cloud so that they could travel night and day.

Exodus 14

God again hardened Pharaoh's heart so that his name would be honoured in the world. Moses told the people not to be afraid. God told Moses to move Israel forward and lift up his rod for the opening of the sea. God was clearly Commander in Chief, night watchman and lone soldier in this victory and Israel was obligated to confess that God was God and that Moses was his servant.

Exodus 15

The Lord's glorious triumph moved Moses and his people to sing. God had become the strength and salvation of this people. He was their God and his name was 'the Lord' (or Yahweh). Pharaoh, who had determined the life of this people before, had proved to be no match for the power of this Lord.

All this led Moses to ask if there was any god like the Lord. Israel knew that it was not their might or their initiative that had saved them but the God of holy love. He would lead them to his holy home — probably an anticipation of the temple in the promised land.

Christians have seen God's mighty deeds in the coming of Jesus, his death and resurrection. As with Israel, God is eager that we rely on his saving power through Christ (Heb. 3:5-14).

EXODUS 16:1 — 17:7

Psalm 105:40–42; John 6:32–33; 1 Corinthians 10:4

FOOD IN THE WILDERNESS / WATER FROM THE ROCK

Story Notes

File no. 29

Exodus 16

For a third time in six weeks, Israel complained to Moses as though he had brought them out of Egypt and was the source of their problem. Their complaint was vicious, 'would that we had died,' they said. God continued to pursue his plan to redeem his people. He would give them quail each evening, showing them that He was their Redeemer. He would give them bread each morning as a revelation of His glory. Right then, the glory of the Lord appeared to them in the cloud. Israel was bogged down in their immediate needs and had no joy in being a people dependent on the living God. But God had revealed his care for his people, and so, revealed his glory. This was to be remembered throughout their history.

By limiting the collection of bread to one day's requirements, and to two before the Sabbath, God was testing them to see if they would follow his instructions. Faith in God had to be expressed as obedience to his commands.

Exodus 17

Again, Israel's anger was aroused by their need, this time, of water, and again, they blamed Moses. Their anger was murderous. God had said he was testing them (Exod. 16:4) but Moses could see that Israel was testing God (Exod. 17: 2). As before, God's response to Israel's complaint was to send Moses on ahead to provide yet another evidence of his grace. God was present with Israel, standing before Moses as though to serve him and Israel's need (cf. Deut. 1:38).

Israel was still no better after 40 years of wandering. They complained again about a lack of water (Num. 20:1-13). These times of unbelief were remembered in Israel's songs. When God tested his people, to know what was in their hearts (Deut. 8:2, 5), they tested the Lord (Ps. 78:17-39; 81:6-10; 95:6-11). On the second occasion of providing water from a rock, Moses lost patience with the people. God, however, was still patient.

God later identified himself as the Rock that had been with them throughout their journeys (Deut. 32:4, 15, 18). He was a Rock to stumble over (Isa. 8:14). Later again, Paul said that the Rock was Christ (1 Cor. 10:1-12). Finally, it was God's own Son who was struck like a rock so that living water could flow out for his people. Through him, God has shown us that his purpose to save us is greater than our angry rebellion.

The food Israel had was spiritual, perhaps in the sense that it was a gift of Fatherly love to them. Therefore, Israel's complaining to Moses was wilful ignorance of divine love. It was also an indulging of themselves, as Paul indicates, and, therefore a warning to us to beware of living as they did.

EXODUS 19:1 — 20:26; 24:3–11

Exodus 21:1 – 23:33; Psalm 119:97–106

GOD GIVES HIS LAW AND COVENANT TO ISRAEL

Story Notes

File no. 30

Exodus 19

God had now brought Israel out of Egypt and to himself. He wanted them to know that it was he who had done this. (It was not Moses, and it had been done in spite of their grumbling). They were now God's priest nation on behalf of the whole earth, and they confessed their willingness to be this people. Moses was to be forever authenticated as their covenant head. From now on, faith in God could not be separated from faith in Moses. The fearsomeness of the occasion is linked to this authentication. It is remarkable to see Moses ascending to God. God had chosen to be God to this people, and to have his covenant head approach him without fear.

Later on, Jesus would say, 'Believe in God. Believe also in me' (John 14:1). He has approached God on our behalf, stood in the place of judgement, and led us to God. He is our covenant Leader (Heb. 3:1-2).

The smoke surging upwards from the top of the mountain, like a kiln, and the shaking of the mountain was sufficient to keep the people from approaching. Israel did not even want God to speak to them. But God required that the people be sanctified, be present, and that they not break through to God. The repetition of this latter requirement suggests the wrongful proximity to God sought by arrogant humanity, as in Eden. Later, some would attempt to come unsummoned to God and would pay with their lives.

Exodus 20

The commandments were addressed directly to the people. They expressed the closeness of God to Israel and the purity of their relationship to him and to each other. (Note the emphasis on relationships: 'before me', 'a jealous God', 'the name of ... your God', 'a Sabbath to the Lord your God', 'you shall not covet; anything that belongs to your neighbour'.) God's relationship to them had been demonstrated beyond doubt; now, as his priestly people, they were to be holy as he was holy. God, speaking to the people in the sights and sounds from the mountain frightened them. Moses said God was testing them. God wanted to know what was in their hearts (cf. Deut. 8:2). In fact, this law would reveal what was in Israel's heart. It would expose them so that they would not be left with false ideas as to their greatness. It would help them to know the God who kept covenant with them when they did not keep covenant with him.

Exodus 24

It was now time for the covenant to be put into effect. The covenant had been explained, and was now read out and agreed to. Sacrifices were offered and the blood (signifying the penalty if either side broke covenant?) was sprinkled on the altar and the people. But the goal of the covenant was communion with God. Seventy elders shared this with Moses on behalf of all the people and they saw the God of Israel. God was willing to be known by his people, and willing to be near them. Then Moses ascended Sinai to actually receive the 'hard copy' of this covenant.

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EXODUS 32:1 — 34:29

Exodus 24:12–18; 25:8,9

THE GOLDEN CALF / MOSES PRAYS FOR HIS PEOPLE

Story Notes

File no. 31

Exodus 32

The Bible is never a mere code to keep, even though that code is God's law. The Bible is the revelation of God in the context of the sin of his people. Only by the revelation of his severe yet gracious dealing with sin is his nature fully revealed.

There could hardly have been a more blatant breaking of the covenant Israel had vowed to keep. It involved the weakness of Aaron, the one who was to be central to their worship. But when Moses heard that God would make a new people from him rather than from these people who had come through the Red Sea, he refused to accept that this was God's final word. They had been baptized into him as covenant head (I Cor. 10:2) and Moses accepted this responsibility by praying that they would still receive what God had promised to them. He would not accept that they were his people, as God had called them. They were the Lord's people.

The tablets, on which God had written, were smashed, signifying that unless God spoke again, it remained in doubt as to who these people were. Were they still under his covenant? Moses believed so. But the continuing revelry had to be stopped and his own tribe assisted him, showing that they, with him, were the Lord's. (We are not told where Aaron was in all this.) But atonement had to be made, and Moses suggested that he may be able to make atonement—given that Aaron would be unable to do this (cf. Exod. 29:37; 30:10). No such offering was prescribed to deal with such high-handed sin. Only our true Head, Jesus Christ, was able to do this and to make atonement once for all.

Exodus 33

The situation was far from resolved because the Lord had not assured Israel of his personal presence and a plague had fallen on the people. God would not go with them personally for Israel's sins would so draw God's anger as to consume them. However, they were to remove their jewellery and wait for God's word to them. Here we are told of the temporary means Moses used for meeting with God as a friend. Moses counted on this friendship with God to ask him that there would be no lessening of his presence, and that he may see the glory of God.

Exodus 34

In receiving copy two of the covenant, Moses was allowed to hear the Lord's name proclaimed. The Lord was merciful. He would deal with sin, even to four generations, but his steadfast love would last for thousands of generations. In the power of this proclamation, not on the basis of his own intercessions, Moses asked again for the Lord to forgive Israel and to take her as his inheritance. The answer was 'Yes'. Some of the provisions of the earlier covenant book were repeated and the law was rewritten.

When God showed his glory to Moses, the face of Moses shone. This made Israel afraid. But Moses called them to him. Paul tells us that the veil Moses put on after speaking to the people was to hide the fading glory (this was possibly a Jewish tradition). But, he went on to say that no such veiling is necessary with Christ in whom we have seen the glory of God (II Cor. 3:7-18) — full of grace and truth (John 1:14).

EXODUS 35:4 — 40:1–38

Exodus 25:1 – 27:21; 30:1–10, 17–28

THE TABERNACLE IN THE WILDERNESS

Story Notes

File no. 32

Exodus 35

Sabbath had been given as a sign that the Lord sanctified his people (31:13). With the covenant broken by man and restored, or rather, maintained by God, the sign of the covenant was reaffirmed. Now was the time to ask who was of a generous heart. The Lord had prepared his people to be generous, or noble, or willing or moved in heart (various words used and repeated), and, in the case of the workers, were enabled by God's own Spirit to make the tabernacle.

Exodus 36

It was to God's glory that he had willing workers, and more than sufficient for his temple. It was also to God's glory that the workmen did not originate anything beyond the command given by God. It is as if they said: 'You know what is necessary to the worship of your name, and we are glad to make it with all the skill which you provide.'

Exodus 40

For something so sacred to be erected was no small thing. The High Priest would only enter the most holy place once a year. The constant use of 'you shall' guided Moses through the stages of what he was to do. Then God's glory filled the temple and thereafter led the people through their path to the Promised Land. God's glory is the outshining of his nature. They were being led by the God who had revealed his very heart to them—a God of mercy—for such he had been to them and such he would always be.

Exodus 25 – 30 notes refer to the use and care of the tabernacle.

Exodus 25

Of first importance would be the ark containing the covenant documentation or law. The covering of this ark was a meeting place of God with his people, and a place where atonement would be made. ('Mercy seat' is derived from a translation by Luther and conveys something of what it must have meant to Israel.)

The table received a daily offering of bread—thanksgiving for 'our daily bread', and a lamp—a witness that God had given them light to worship the true God. Christ, the true High Priest, now tends the churches, which are a lamp (Revelation 1). This suggests that the churches are to acknowledge that God has given them light, and that, as they are tended by Christ, they are a light to the world.

Exodus 26

The temple had to be transportable, but it was to be of one piece when put together. Each part was to be exactly like Moses was shown on the mountain, the heavenly temple where the eternal Son ministered, not just a plan (Heb. 8:1–5). There can be no true worship which is not an acknowledgment of and participation in the worship established by Christ in his eternal love for the Father, a worship which culminated in the offering up of himself by the Spirit and the sprinkling of his blood (Heb. 9:14).

Exodus 27

Part of God's revelation to Israel was how the heavy items for the temple were to be carried. Nothing was insignificant in establishing the modes of worship for his people. Sacrifices for the altar were described later, however the altar had horns on its corners which would later be used by suppliants being pursued by those seeking retribution. The Israelites symbolically devoted themselves to God as an offering, for God to do with them what he chose.

THE TABERNACLE IN THE WILDERNESS con't

Exodus 30

All of the details of Israel's worship must have been wonderful for them to consider. God was among them to meet with them. Their incense rose from an altar just outside the most holy place. But this most holy altar was to be sanctified annually. A small ransom fee, as a reminder of their being ransomed by sacrifice, was to be part of every registration of the people. Washing before offering sacrifice was mandatory. Everything needed to be anointed with a unique formula oil to set it apart for God. In these many ways, Israel knew that they had access to God and that God maintained the holiness of his own place among them. Worship was never their 'own thing'; the priests, and in them, the people, were appropriately appointed courtiers in the presence of God's majesty.

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LEVITICUS 16:2–34

Leviticus 1:1–17

THE DAY OF ATONEMENT

Story Notes

File no. 33

The Lord has demonstrated that he has accepted the offerings of Israel by burning them with his own fire (9:24), but now, the sons of Aaron who had assisted in these offerings, die by that same fire because they offer unauthorised worship before the Lord (10:1-3). Those who draw near to God on behalf of his people are to sanctify God among them so that his glory is apparent. How then will Israel's priests lead the worship? Given the sins of the people, can they live with God himself among them?

All of Israel's varied ceremonial worship has its climax in the Day of Atonement, on the tenth day of the seventh month each year. Special purification (sin) and reparation (guilt) offerings, and the daily burnt offerings are all with a view to making atonement, but on this day, atonement is made for the sanctuary (v. 16). The high priest enters the most holy place on this day alone, to present offerings for himself and the people. The fact of God dwelling among a sinful people means that God's holy place is contaminated by their presence. But God remains camped among them, and provides for atonement for the whole edifice, as well as for the people (v. 17).

The priest represents his people in their priestly function (Exod. 19:6). He bears responsibility for the people as he enters God's presence (Exod. 28:29-30). Therefore, he needs special offerings for himself—a bull for a purification offering and a ram for a burnt offering. From the people, he has two goats for a purification offering and a ram for a burnt offering. After making purification for himself, he makes purification for the people. In both cases, some of the blood of this offering is sprinkled on the front of and in front of the mercy seat, that is, God's throne, and on the horns of the altar in the outer court. In this way, everything is cleansed and sanctified (v. 19).

Atonement for the sins of the people requires not one goat but two. One dies as a purification offering, but after cleansing the most holy place, the tent of meeting and the altar, the other goat is placed in God's presence to make atonement 'over it' (v. 10, ESV). On other occasions, hands are laid on the head of the animal that would die, but here, on the head of the one that will be taken out into the wilderness. All Israel's iniquities, transgressions and sins are confessed over it. It is driven away into a wilderness, bearing away their sins (v. 21). The atonement by which God lived among his people involves annulling the death that threatens sinners (propitiation), but also, bearing away their sins.

After all this, the priest washes and readies himself to offer the burnt offerings, a ram for himself and a ram for the people. This also is to make atonement, but now, with emphasis being on giving devotion to the Lord.

So God is among his people, and they are 'clean before the Lord from all [their] sins' (v. 30). This solemn rite is to be repeated throughout Israel's history, that is, until the Christ comes who will fulfil all that is involved in this Day of Atonement.

God himself has come to dwell with us in Jesus Christ (John 1:14). He is the temple of God among us (John 2:21), and also our Great High Priest (Heb. 4:14). But then, this Priest comes with his own blood (Heb. 9:12) and purifies the temple of his people (Eph. 2:16-22). Gladly, we confess over his head all our sin. Gratefully, we accept his offering for sin and see it borne away. Then, we may offer ourselves as a living sacrifice (Rom. 12:2), and offer acceptable worship (Heb. 12:28), not fearing his presence among us, but heeding every instruction given.

NUMBERS 13:1 — 14:45

Deuteronomy 1:19–45

THE TWELVE SPIES

Story Notes

File no. 34

The book of Numbers begins and ends with a numbering of the fighting men in Israel, the first numbering to prepare for an assault on the Promised land, and the second, after Israel's refusal to take up this opportunity, to regroup for their entry under Joshua. In the mean time, a whole generation dies in the wilderness. Our story here is the pivotal refusal of Israel to take up God's command to enter into their inheritance. It comes after a series of complaints, complaints that continue the earlier complaints listed in Exodus 15—18 and 32—34.

There is not much to commend Israel in this book. On the other hand, we witness God's steady purpose to give his people what he has purposed to give them, and, a representation of this in the leadership and intercession of Moses and in the Spirit given to the 70 elders who were chosen to help with his task. In particular, we will see the emergence of Joshua and Caleb who will be pivotal figures in the story ahead.

13:1-33

God requires spying of the land, reminding them of his promise to give it to them. The people choose their leaders to do this, one from each tribe.

The list is different from the leaders chosen in chapter 1 and may reflect the fact that, here, men suited to the task are chosen. Only two of them are ever heard of again in Scripture and one is identified by a new name: Hoshea, 'he saved' is changed to 'Jahweh saves'.

Moses wants a full inventory of land, produce, people and fortifications. (In Deuteronomy 1:19-25, Moses tells us this was a request of the people themselves to which he agreed.) There is no lack of faith in getting all the information possible. Spies are to set out immediately north of them, in the wilderness area, and then on to the hill country that they know or presume is further north.

In fact, the spies travel as far as Rehob, which may be near to Dan in the far North of Israel as settled under Joshua. Their work is thorough. They locate the ancient city of Hebron where Abraham had lived. They note the notoriously tall people of Anak there. They bring back samples of the fruit as requested and name the fertile valley Eshcol (lit. 'cluster').

The majority report of the spies confirms God's promise: the land flows with milk and honey (cf. Ex. 3:8), but their awareness of this promise is not matched with faith to go in and possess the land (cf. Heb. 3:7, 12; 4:2). The spirit of complaint that had infected Israel since leaving Egypt has overtaken these spies and they lead the people, with a list of obstacles, into fear: the people are strong, the cities are fortified, the giant people are there, every location has its entrenched occupants.

Caleb wants to put all this in the context of God's promise: 'We will surely overcome it', but to no avail. The other spies use the emotive word Nephilim (Gen. 6:4) to describe the Anakim, and say they felt, and must have looked like, grasshoppers to them.

14:1-45

All the pent up anger of Israel because of the difficulties they have faced since leaving Egypt pours out in a night of tears and further grumbling. They seem to forget the slavery they had endured and wish they could have died there, or, at least, in the wilderness. How acute is our hatred of relying on God! Israel blames God himself for this impasse and envisages their children becoming slaves for the people of Caanan. They propose a new leadership to take them right back to Egypt.

THE TWELVE SPIES con't

Moses and Aaron fall down before God in the presence of the people at this rebellion (cf. Ex. 16:1). Joshua and Caleb don't agree with their fellow spies and, tearing their clothes in grief and distress, attempt a reappraisal of their situation: 'If the Lord is pleased with us' is their starting point. 'Do not rebel' is their exhortation'. But all to no avail. Israel wants them stoned.

But now, an appearance of the glory of the Lord in the tabernacle stops all proceedings. 'I will make a nation of you Moses'. But Moses, Mediator of the covenant of grace, knows the covenant, knows God, and intercedes on the basis of what would be to God's glory. Is God unable to do what he promises? God has said he will make of Moses a *greater* nation than this present one, but Moses says, 'Let the power of the Lord be *great*...'. He reminds God of the name and nature he revealed at Sinai (Exod. 34:6-7; cf. 23:21), 'slow to anger...but ...visiting the iniquity of the father on the children...'. There has never been a time when Israel did not need God's forgiveness. 'Pardon them again' says Moses, 'according to the *greatness* of your loving kindness'.

God pardons Israel. In other words, they will continue under his blessing, but the present generation will not reach the destination. They will wander in this wilderness as many years as the days of the spies' reconnaissance. God knows that their ten times expressed rebellion will not change. The children, they say, will be slaves to the Canaanites will enter in and conquer the land. Those who have seen the exodus and other miracles will die in the wilderness, except Joshua and Caleb, who continue to believe the promise of God. As if to settle the matter, the spies whose report was 'bad', die right there.

God's presence has changed the struggle for power. God has wanted Israel to know him in the person of Moses and in the report of Joshua and Caleb but they will not. Now God has settled the matter, and directed them away from their Northern route. After all, the feared Amalekites and Canaanites live in the valleys. Israel mourns but still wants to be in control, wants to enter the land forthwith. Moses explains, 'The Lord is not with you.' That was all that mattered to Moses (Ex. 33:15-16). Israel must suffer a debilitating and humiliating defeat before they realise that what God has said is exactly what will happen. According to their own fears, the Amalekites and Canaanites defeat them.

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NUMBERS 20:14–21; 21:4–9

John 3:14,15

THE BRONZE SNAKE

Story Notes

File no. 35

20:14-21

Little is said of the 40 years Israel has spent in the wilderness, other than her ongoing complaints and uprisings against Moses. But now, again at Kadesh, Moses makes preparations to approach the Promised Land from the East, rather than the earlier attempt from the South.

Edomites are related to Israel, through Esau, brother of Jacob, and Moses sees the possibility of shortening the trip Northwards by negotiating a route through their territory. He does not speak of conquest because the Edomites are not among the Amorites whose iniquity is full (Gen. 15:16). Rather, he reminds them of their being brothers, speaks of the hard time Pharaoh gave to Israel, and the strength of the Lord's angel in overcoming him. He understands foreign diplomacy and says they will not do other than travel along the established trade route. With the offer refused once, he tries again, promising to pay for all water used from their wells.

However, the Edomites show their hostility to Israel, and to what God is revealing to the world through them, by refusing passage. With a second request, they send out their substantial army. Israel has no command to retaliate and must take the longer route south and around their land.

21:1-3

Even the alternative route to avoid trouble with Edom was contested, but this time, by the Canannites, from Arad in the Negev desert. These are included among those whose country will be given to Israel (Ex. 23:23). They fought Israel and took captives, and Israel, mindful that they have no victory other than what the Lord grants, promises to take no captives if he will give them victory. The Lord, as always, hears the voice of the contrite, and gives them a resounding victory. The place is named Hormah, meaning 'devoted'. It is the first city taken that then becomes part of Israel (Josh. 12:14). This victory stands in stark contrast with the earlier arrogance and defeat that ended at this city (cf. 14:45).

21:4-9

The victory over Arad is not enough to suppress discontent as Israel makes the lengthy trip around Edom. The previous generation has died off but this new generation repeats the complaints of their parents, against God, Moses, their lack of water and the same old food. The Lord has been and will be gracious to them but he confronts this discontent head-on, with a plague of deadly snakes.

The people seek mercy from the Lord, through Moses, perhaps, for the first time. Yet again, Moses prays for the preservation and salvation of Israel, and the Lord tells him how to avert the disaster, with a serpent cast in bronze and held up on a pole. If victims looked at this snake, they are immediately healed.

How wonderfully, our Lord sees this as a portrayal of his death, and of ourselves, who, in the midst of our ungrateful sinfulness, must look to him for our salvation (John 3:14-15).

NUMBERS 22:1 – 25:18

2 Peter 2:15,16; Jude 11; Revelation 2:14.

BALAK AND BALAAM

Story Notes

File no. 36

Israel's wilderness journey is nearly over and we will soon hear about the second census of fighting men in readiness for the conquest of the Promised Land. But, before that, God's promise regarding his people is shown to be non-negotiable. Most of this story is about a foreign king who wants to overcome Israel, and about the pagan prophet he hires, but it concludes with a dramatic account of the Lord jealously securing Israel's loyalty.

The people of Israel are East of Jordan, but opposite Jericho, across the River. They have already conquered the territories of Sihon and Og (21:23-25; Deut. 2:34-35), East of Jordan River, additional to what God has promised, but they are now within reach of what will be their first conquest of the Promised Land proper.

Moab sees how numerous Israel is (cf. Ex. 1:7), knows they have been rescued from Egypt, and have defeated other surrounding armies. They must try something better than force, so they seek to hire a well-known pagan prophet and diviner (22:7), Balaam. This would involve 3 weeks of travel each way because he comes from Pethor, in Northern Mesopotamia (Modern Eastern Turkey), near the upper Euphrates River.

Moab, like Edom, is a people related to the Israelites. They are descendents of Lot, but, like the Edomites, not willing to aid the purpose of God to give his people access through their land.

King Balak is desperate, but resourceful and persuasive. He believes in the power of Balaam's blessings and cursings, and prefers to trust these rather than to hear the promise given to Abraham (Gen. 12:1-3).

Balaam, as prophet, seeks Israel's God, Yahweh (this is represented by capitals to spell 'Lord'), and the Lord comes and tells him he cannot curse a blessed people. So the first enquiry fails. But they return with more senior ambassadors and greater promises, and Balaam again asks them to wait overnight. He calls the Lord 'my God' and makes it clear there is no power he has to countermand his promises, but, as it turns out, he has no personal love for Israel's God.

The Lord says Balaam may go, but, it seems, this is to test him; he already knows what God thinks and knows that he has no power to change God's mind. So God's anger is stirred against Balaam and 'the angel of the Lord' stands in his way. (An angel of the Lord has appeared to Abraham and to Moses, so this is high priority business!) Even a donkey can see this angel, but not Balaam. The donkey becomes the victim of his folly, but then, also, the mouthpiece for God's wisdom! It seems that Balaam does not see the irony in God using an ass to show him what is really happening.

Then, the Lord himself opens the eyes of Balaam. He has been so angry that he has not been surprised at having a conversation with an animal. Now he sees the angel with drawn sword. (How jealously, the Lord is caring for his people! Who shall condemn if it is God who justifies— Rom. 8:31-34.) The angel of the Lord repeats the complaint of the donkey, that Balaam has beaten his beast three times. In fact, the angel says, if the donkey had not seen him, he would have killed Balaam! Balaam's way is perverse, or reckless.

Balaam is contrite and looks for direction—'if it is evil...I will turn back'. He is a person who must be controlled like an animal because he cannot discern God's ways (cf. Ps. 32:9). It is through such a prophet that God chooses to reveal his unchangeable love for Israel, and he is told to proceed.

BALAK AND BALAAM con't

So Balaam meets Balak, the latter miffed that he could not buy this man's loyalty immediately. Balaam has known from the beginning that a prophet may only speak God's word, and has had this truth drilled into him, but he now proceeds with his sacrifices. These are not the sacrifices prescribed by God but, more probably, superstitious rites designed to humour the deity or to seek for 'omens' and to 'divine' the will of the deity (22:7; 23:23; 24:1), things that would soon be condemned by Moses (Deut. 18:9-14). But even so, he knows he has no power to say other than what is revealed by Yahweh.

The deeper reason for Balaam's reticence to curse Israel is given later by Moses. The Lord loves Israel and will not listen to Balaam (Deut. 23:4-5; Josh. 24:9-10; Micah 6:5).

Balak takes his hired prophet to three locations, in each of which he can see only a part of the assembled people of God. At each location he requires seven altars and seven bulls and rams as sacrifices. He is given his *first* oracle of unqualified blessing on Israel, reaffirming the promises made to Abraham: they cannot be cursed; they are unique among the nations; they are exceedingly numerous. His *second* oracle affirms that God does not change what he has already said (in the first oracle). God's promises come from himself and not in response to the offerings Balaam makes. They have 'the shout of a king' among them, although at present they have no king, and they will certainly conquer their enemies. The promise of kings in Israel had also been made to Abraham (Gen. 17:6).

Now Balaam knows that further looking for omens is useless and, although the sacrifices are made as before, he does not look at them for clues, but looks to the wilderness where Israel is camped, and the Spirit of God speaks directly through him in a *third* oracle. His eye is opened, he sees what Almighty God sees—Israel living under God's blessing, in their land, a king among them, and all their enemies subdued. He says, again, what had been said to Abraham, 'Blessed are those who bless you, and cursed are those who curse you' (as in Gen. 12:3).

Balak is furious, retracts all his promises of reward and advises Balaam to go home. Balaam agrees to do so, but says he has been consistent in saying he could not declare other than what he is told. He truly is a prophet, even though not living in the good of what he knows. His *fourth* and last oracle comes without further sacrifice or request from Balak. He speaks what is given to him by God, the Most High, the Almighty. He sees a king coming to Israel, though not yet, and this king will subdue Moab, Edom, Seir, Amalek and the Kenites. No regional power will ever withstand the coming and the power of Israel.

The two men go their way, but, as we discover, not before Balaam has left some advice (31:16). The story that follows does not just 'happen' but is incited by Balaam. It appears, also, that Balaam stays among the Midianites because we hear that he is killed when they are defeated (31:8; Josh. 13:22). It is his greed and his parting suggestion that make him the model for later heretical teachers (2 Pet. 2:15; Jude 11; Rev. 2:14).

Moabite women make themselves available as harlots, and Israelite men fall for the ruse. Having cast off restraint, they also participate in Moabite worship, and the Lord, who has vowed not to curse the people of Israel, is jealously enraged at their unfaithfulness. How can they show such disregard for the love he has for them? God tells Moses to have every chief person executed and hung up in the sun for God to see. Reparation is needed for so great a crime. Judges among the people must execute those personally implicated in the whoring and idolatry. God himself sends a plague and the people are brought to mourning.

The people had become so arrogant that one son of a leader brings his Moabite prostitute (also the child of a leader) within sight of the grieving Moses and assembly of Israel. Phinehas, grandson of

BALAK AND BALAAM con't

Israel's first High Priest, executes both on the spot. By this act of jealous love for Yahweh, the plague is stopped, but not before some 24,000 have died.

Phinehas has done a notable thing and Israel must know it. God says 'He was jealous with my jealousy', and, of course, Israel owed their lives to him for his understanding of what was happening and his action to keep Israel within the arena of his love. God's covenant of peace is with Phinehas in perpetuity, meaning there will always be a priesthood for Israel who will make atonement for the people, as had Phinehas (cf. Lev. 4—7). God will retain his covenant of peace with the nation (Mal. 2:4-5), but this covenant will always be secured by the offering of blood in sacrifice. In contrast to this covenant of peace, those who have harassed the Lord's people must be harassed, not humoured.

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NUMBERS 27:12–23; JOSHUA 1:1–18

Deuteronomy 31:1 — 34:12

GOD TAKES MOSES 'HOME' / GOD CHOOSES A NEW LEADER

Story Notes

File no. 37

Numbers 27:12–23

The renumbering of the people has put on notice that the time has come to enter the Promised Land. But Moses knows he will not enter (Num. 20:12) and is now informed that the time for him to die has come. In fact, this will not occur until we reach Deuteronomy 34, but this advice, and further reference to it in Deuteronomy, keeps us aware that Moses must die before Israel occupies the Land and that his leadership is basic to all that will happen when they arrive there.

Moses had failed to reveal God's graciousness when he angrily struck a rock to give Israel water in the wilderness, so now, God says he cannot take Israel any further. But he may see the Land from the top of Abarim, or Nebo, looking from Moab, across the Jordan Valley, into the hills beyond. Aaron, who shared in this misrepresentation of the Lord, has already been taken.

Moses has been a reticent leader, and a sometimes-angry one, but God has spoken to him face to face (Num. 12:8); he has proclaimed the name of the Lord and interceded so that Israel would not perish. He knows the significance of leadership, someone to go in and out before the people (probably in battle— Deut. 31:2f; Josh. 14:11; 1 Sam. 18:13). How important this will now be, given that Israel must inherit their new Land through conquest. So, again, Moses prays, that the God who gives spirit to each person (Num. 16:22; cf. Heb. 12:9) will provide his own creatures with the leader they need.

Israel's leaders were shepherds, reflecting the nature of God to shepherd his people. Jesus becomes this for the Church, lest we also be like sheep without a shepherd (Matt. 9:36; John 10:3-5).

Joshua is now named as successor to Moses, and identified as a man of spirit, or the Spirit. This is later demonstrated in his wisdom and in the acceptance given to him (Deut. 34:9). However, it will be 'some' of his authority that Moses will pass on to him. Moses has led with Aaron at his side, and Joshua will lead with the High Priest Eleazar at his side, but Moses has known the Lord and had access to him in a way that is unrepeatable. He saw the Lord face to face (Num. 12:8). He has gone to the Lord directly for guidance (as in the immediately preceding incident of Zelophehad's daughters), but Joshua will go to Eleazar who will, in turn, use his Urim and Thummim to find God's will (Ex. 28:30; Deut. 33:8). Joshua is from the tribe of Ephraim, not a priest like Moses, but Moses makes it clear that his leadership is from God, and that it will operate with the acceptance and help of the High Priest Eleazar. No one can doubt that they will be led under God's own authority.

Joshua 1:1-18

Now that Moses is dead, God speaks directly to Joshua, just as he had to Moses. They must cross the Jordan (as they had earlier crossed the Red Sea) because God is *giving* them their Promised Land.

Moses has been prohibited from entering the Land, but now that he is dead, the people are ready to enter it. But he remains the one who delineated the territory (Deut. 11:24; Josh. 14:9), from their point of crossing the River to the far North bordering Lebanon and the River Euphrates and the Mediterranean Sea.

The Land is *given* to Joshua as their leader, wherever his foot treads. It is his, of course, to *allot* to Israel. God will be with him as he had been with Moses making his leadership incontestable. God being with Israel is the key to all that has happened to date, and the one thing that identifies them as God's people (Ex. 33:15). So Joshua is commanded to be strong and courageous, because it will be him who *gives* Israel their inheritance. His courage will have the 'shape' of keeping God's commands. There must be no more indifference at this point. The Book of the Law must be his meditation and practice constantly so that God will prosper him in his leadership. And his courage is to be inspired by the presence of God with him; he must not

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allow himself to be dismayed. What applies to Joshua, of course, must be so for the people as well, but it is Joshua who is addressed here.

Joshua begins to exercise his leadership forthwith: Israel must be ready to move in three days; and the tribes who have already received their inheritance East of Jordan must release their fighting men to assist their brothers so they receive their inheritance also (as negotiated earlier with Moses). The Israelites recognise their new leader and say they will obey him as they obeyed Moses. This is hardly what had really happened under Moses but it expresses the seamless way in which leadership passes to Joshua. They understand they are a nation under God and pray that God will be with Joshua as he had been with Moses. Insubordination to Joshua will now be a capital offence. They mean to make good in this opportunity to receive the inheritance promised to their Patriarchs.

Note that Moses remains the basis of all that is happening. God spoke to Moses, was with Moses and told Moses what territory they would conquer. Now God will speak to Joshua and will be with Joshua as they take this territory. It is this that makes it possible for Joshua to proceed; that everything will be as it was under Moses.

In the New Testament, Paul is concerned that Jews seek the welfare of Gentiles and that Gentiles seek the welfare of Jews, all with a view to their inheriting the kingdom together. The same is true of his teaching about those who are weak and those who are strong in faith.

This coming victory under Joshua is given to the whole Church in Old and New Testaments. Saints in heaven will sing the song of Moses and the Lamb because, finally, the victory of God over the world and all evil powers is of one piece. In another sense, this victory anticipates the victory of Jesus who shares the same name (in Greek form rather than Hebrew), a name that means 'the Lord is salvation' and which is given to him because 'he will save his people from their sins' (Matt. 1:21). As the Lord is with Joshua, so he is with Jesus (John 3:2) and it is this that establishes his leadership among us. The Father gives the kingdom to him with a view to him giving it to us (Luke 22:29-30). He is courageous in the face of all his enemies and is careful to do all that his Father commands him. It is he who gains the victory and it is his victory we share.

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