

Chapter 8

# The Law



*The Laws in Exodus and Leviticus gave the people of Israel a form of government unique in the world.*

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### Read

**Exodus 32:1 - 35**

**Numbers 13:17 - 14:35  
20:2 - 13**

**Deuteronomy**

**5:6 - 21; 6:4 - 5**

**7:1 - 5; 10:12 - 16**

**28:58 - 68; 34:1 - 12**

**W**hen Moses disappeared for more than a month, the people of Israel did not know what had happened to him. They grew impatient; and as a result of their impatience, they sinned so greatly that they lost much of their special status. Now they would be held to a rigorous code of laws that would constantly remind them how they had sinned.

But that code of laws would not be enough to keep them on the path of holiness. After forty years of wandering in the desert, the Israelites, still rebellious, needed a stronger constitution to hold them together. Moses would have to give them the laws in Deuteronomy, laws that included many concessions to their “hardness of heart.” Even those laws would not be enough; Moses prophesied that the people would break them and Israel would fall apart. But he also foresaw a time when God

would bring all his people together under a new law, one that would be written in their hearts.



The Old Law is indeed the first stage of the revealed law, and as we will see in the New Testament, the Law of the Gospel fulfills, refines, surpasses, and leads the Old Law to its perfection (Mt 5:17-19). Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount, “far from abolishing or devaluing the moral prescriptions of the Old Law, releases their hidden potential and has new demands arise from them: it reveals their entire divine and human truth” (CCC 1968).

## The Golden Calf Changes Israel's Relationship With God

- **The people of Israel have Aaron make an idol for them to worship.**
- **The “golden calf” is a fertility god like the ones they knew in Egypt.**
- **Worshipping the golden calf involves not only idolatry but also immoral behavior.**

**T**he Exodus was Israel's declaration of independence. Like the American Declaration of Independence, it did not specify any form of government or any laws. It simply separated them from the government that had controlled them.

As long as they followed Moses' instructions, the Israelites did well. But when Moses was away, the people of Israel quickly fell back into their old habits.

*When the people saw that Moses delayed to come down from the mountain, the people gathered themselves together to Aaron, and said to him, “Up, make us gods, who shall go before us; as for this Moses, the man who brought us up out of the land of Egypt, we do not know what has become of him.” And Aaron said to them, “Take off the rings of gold which are in the ears of your wives, your sons, and your daughters, and bring them to me.” (Ex 32: 1-2)*

Perhaps Aaron thought he could make the people stop and think by showing them how expensive their project would be. But the people were not discouraged.

*So all the people took off the rings of gold which were in their ears, and brought them to Aaron. And he received the gold at their hand, and fashioned it with a graving tool, and made a molten calf; and they said, “These are your gods, O Israel, who brought you up out of the land of Egypt!” When Aaron saw this, he built an altar before it; and Aaron made proclamation and said, “Tomorrow shall be a feast to the LORD.” And they rose up early on the morrow, and offered burnt offerings and brought peace offerings; and the people sat down to eat and drink, and rose up to play. (Ex 32: 3-6)*

Why a “golden calf?” The statue of a bull that Aaron had made represented Apis, an Egyptian fertility god. The bull is a common symbol of strength and power—the Canaanites, too, had a fertility god in the form of a bull. When the sacred author tells us that the people “sat down to eat and drink, and rose up to play,” he means they indulged in all kinds of immoral celebrations, just as worshipers of other fertility gods did in that time. Aaron might have been trying to save some appearance of loyalty to God by saying that the statue represented Yahweh, the True God, but the people were in fact worshipping a fertility god like the ones they had known in Egypt.

In other words, the people had completely renounced the covenant they had just made with God, and the moral laws that went with it. They had turned around and gone back to their old Egyptian ways. And they pretended that it was this bull-god who had brought them out of Egypt!



Egyptian statue of Apis from the 18th Dynasty, ca. 1380 B.C.

## The Institution Of The Priesthood

- The Israelites' rejection of God causes God to reject them.
- Moses pleads for the people.
- The tribe of Levi earns its priesthood by attacking idolatry.

Up on the mountain, Moses had just received the two tablets with the Law written by God's own hand. Now God suddenly brought him some very bad news.

And the LORD said to Moses, "Go down; for your people, whom you brought up out of the land of Egypt, have corrupted themselves; they have turned aside quickly out of the way which I commanded them; they have made for themselves a molten calf, and have worshiped it and sacrificed to it, and said, 'These are your gods, O Israel, who brought you up out of the land of Egypt!'" (Ex 32: 7-8)

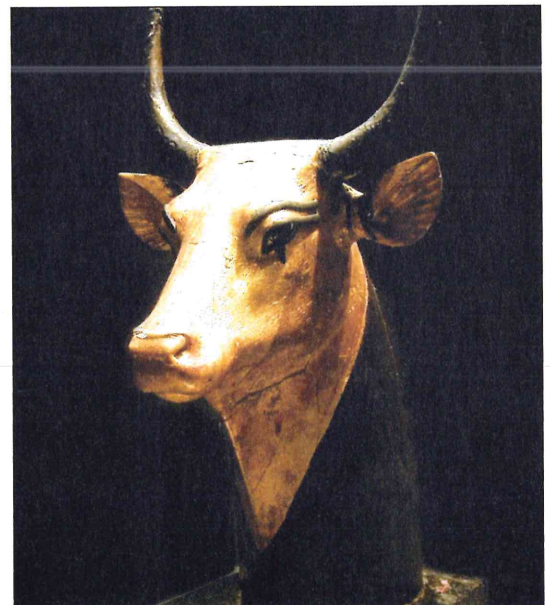
God no longer called Israel "my people." Now Israel was "your people." After all, the people had decided they didn't want the Lord for their God. Now God had every right to disown them.

And the LORD said to Moses, "I have seen this people, and behold, it is a stiff-necked people; now therefore let me alone, that my wrath may burn hot against them and I may consume them; but of you I will make a great nation." (Ex 32: 9-10)

God was offering Moses the chance to be a new Abraham. But Moses was supremely selfless. Instead of taking the chance to be the founder of a new nation, he pleaded with God for Israel.

But Moses besought the LORD his God, and said, "O LORD, why does thy wrath burn hot against thy people, whom thou hast brought forth out of the land of Egypt with great power and with a mighty hand? Why should the Egyptians say, 'With evil intent did he bring them forth, to slay them in the mountains, and to consume them from the face of the earth'? Turn from thy fierce wrath, and repent of this evil against thy people. Remember Abraham, Isaac, and Israel, thy servants, to whom thou didst swear by thine own self, and didst say to them, 'I will multiply your descendants as the stars of heaven, and all this land that I have promised I will give to your descendants, and they shall inherit it for ever.'" And the LORD repented of the evil which he thought to do to his people. (Ex 32: 11-14)

After that, Moses went down the mountain and saw things for himself. The celebration was still going on, and it was even worse than Moses had expected. Whatever Moses saw, it made him furious. He was so furious, in fact, that he threw the two stone tablets on the ground and smashed them to bits. Since God had already prepared him for the golden calf, what Moses saw must have been much worse than simple idolatry. But the smashed tablets were a good symbol of the covenant that Israel had broken.



Egypt's Cow goddess,  
Mehit-Weret, from  
Tutankhamen's tomb.



*“And he took the calf which they had made, and burnt it with fire, and ground it to powder, and scattered it upon the water, and made the people of Israel drink it.” (Ex 32: 20)*

After demanding an explanation from Aaron, Moses realized that the people were on the road to total destruction.

And when Moses saw that the people had broken loose (for Aaron had let them break loose, to their shame among their enemies), then Moses stood in the gate of the camp, and said, “Who is on the LORD’s side? Come to me.” And all the sons of Levi gathered themselves together to him. And he said to them, “Thus says the LORD God of Israel, ‘Put every man his sword on his side, and go to and fro from gate to gate throughout the camp, and slay every man his brother, and every man his companion, and every man his neighbor.’” And the sons of Levi did according to the word of Moses; and there fell of the people that day about three thousand men. And Moses said, “Today you have ordained yourselves for the service of the LORD, each one at the cost of his son and of his brother, that he may bestow a blessing upon you this day.” (Ex 32: 25-29)

It was certainly a harsh judgment. But by slaughtering the idolaters, the Levites prevented the utter destruction of Israel. The nation would survive.

But now things would be different.

After Israel’s sin, when the people had turned away from God to worship the golden calf, God hears Moses’ prayer of intercession and agrees to walk in the midst of an unfaithful people, thus demonstrating his love (cf. Ex 32; 33: 12-17). When Moses asks to see his glory, God responds “I will make all my goodness pass before you, and will proclaim before you my name ‘the LORD’ [YHWH]” (Ex 33: 18-19). Then the LORD passes before Moses and proclaims, “YHWH, YHWH, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness”; Moses then confesses that the LORD is a forgiving God (Ex 34: 5-6; cf. 34: 9). (CCC 210)

## After The Fall

- **By falling into idolatry, Israel loses some of its unique relationship with God**
- **The Levites assume the priesthood that would have belonged to all the people**
- **The laws given after the golden calf are meant to teach humility and holiness**

Israel's sin in worshiping the golden calf was much like the original sin of Adam and Eve. Once again, it destroyed a unique relationship with God.

The original covenant with Israel would have made the whole nation a kingdom of priests. Every father would have been a priest in his own house. Every first-born son would have been dedicated to God. Every family would have known God personally.

But now it was obvious that nothing could take Egyptian idolatry out of Israel. So the Levites became the priestly class, insulating the rest of the people from God. Otherwise, their own sinfulness might literally kill them. Without a mediator, they could never safely approach the absolute holiness of God.

The chosen people was constituted by God as "a kingdom of priests and a holy nation" (Ex 19: 6; cf. Is 61: 6). But within the people of Israel, God chose one of the twelve tribes, that of Levi, and set it apart for liturgical service; God himself is its inheritance (cf. Nm 1: 48-53; Jos 13: 33). A special rite consecrated the beginnings of the priesthood of the Old Covenant. The priests are "appointed to act on behalf of men in relation to God, to offer gifts and sacrifices for sins" (Heb 5: 1; cf. Ex 29: 1-30; Lv 8). (CCC 1539)

Instituted to proclaim the Word of God and to restore communion with God by sacrifices and prayer (cf. Mal 2: 7-9), this priesthood nevertheless remains powerless to bring about salvation, needing to repeat its sacrifices ceaselessly and being unable to achieve a definitive sanctification, which only the sacrifice of Christ would accomplish (cf. Heb 5: 3; 7: 27; 10: 1-4). (CCC 1540)

Just like Adam and Eve, the Israelites had brought toil and labor on themselves. Now they would have to live by the law. Every aspect of their lives would be bound by rules. These precise regulations would tell them everything from how and what they could eat to how they should wear their beards.

The laws that God gave Israel were different from human laws. They were meant to do more than just keep order. Even though God had brought them out of slavery in Egypt, the people had shown that they were still slaves to Egypt's gods. They were not yet holy enough to bring God's message to the nations.

With laws of ritual purity, God meant to teach his people humility. They would have to live apart from the other nations, so that they would not be infected with false religions. And they would have to make regular sacrifices, each time deliberately slaughtering one of the animals they had worshiped as gods in Egypt. In other words, every day they would have to kill one of their false gods.

These laws might have looked like a punishment, but God was still a loving father to his people. Like a loving father, he did not merely punish his people for what they had done wrong. He gave them laws to help rehabilitate them. In the same way, our own parents would tighten the rules when we got into serious trouble—not because they had stopped loving us, but because they wanted to keep us from getting into trouble again.

Moses went up the mountain once again, and God wrote two new stone tablets to replace the ones that Moses had smashed. God renewed his covenant with his people, emphasizing the prohibitions against worshiping foreign gods.

## Heaven On Earth

- **Moses receives instructions for building the Tabernacle.**
- **The design of the Tabernacle is an earthly representation of the heavenly temple.**

**T**he book of Exodus ends with the building of the Tabernacle, the portable temple that would be God's dwelling-place in the midst of his people. When the work was finally finished, all the people watched as God took up residence:

Then the cloud covered the tent of meeting, and the glory of the LORD filled the tabernacle. And Moses was not able to enter the tent of meeting, because the cloud abode upon it, and the glory of the LORD filled the tabernacle. Throughout all their journeys, whenever the cloud was taken up from over the tabernacle, the people of Israel would go onward; but if the cloud was not taken up, then they did not go onward till the day that it was taken up. For throughout all their journeys the cloud of the LORD was upon the tabernacle by day, and fire was in it by night, in the sight of all the house of Israel. (Ex 40: 34-38)



*The Cloud of the Lord and the Children of Israel in the Wilderness by Raphael*

In the Septuagint, the Greek translation of the Old Testament that the New Testament writers used, verse 35 says that the power of the Lord “overshadowed” the Tabernacle. That same unusual word will come up in Luke 1: 35: “The power of the Most High will overshadow you.” In Luke, an angel is speaking to Mary, telling her that she is about to become the Mother of God.

## The Law

- **The book of Leviticus teaches Israel how to be a holy people.**
- **The deaths of Aaron's sons showed how important it was to follow the rules precisely.**

**A**fter Exodus comes a book we call Leviticus, a Latin word meaning “having to do with the Levites.” In Hebrew tradition it was known as the Manual for Priests, and that’s exactly what it is. Now that the Levites were going to be the mediators between God and Israel, they needed an instruction book. God gave the instructions they needed to Moses in the Tabernacle.

There are many different kinds of laws in Leviticus, but the reason for all of them is the same: to teach Israel how to be a holy people. Leviticus, in fact, is a manual of holiness. By one scholar’s count, the word “holiness” occurs eighty-seven times in this one book.

The book starts with the people’s relationship with God, giving instructions for sacrifices (Chapter 17) and the consecration of the priests (Chapter 8).

In Chapter 9 the priests begin following the instructions they have received so far. But in Chapter 10, Aaron’s sons Nadab and Abihu “offered unholy fire before the Lord, such as he had not commanded them.”<sup>1</sup> In other words, they thought they could worship their own way, ignoring the laws God had given them.

The results were fatal. The fire from the Lord’s Presence flared up and burned both of them to death. The rules were meant to be taken seriously.

After that short demonstration of what it means to be a holy people under the law, Leviticus goes on to give the rules about what foods the people could eat. The rules are very specific, and they have to do with more than health. Some foods that are perfectly healthy to eat—shellfish and pork, for example—are prohibited. Whenever their neighbors offered them those foods, the Israelites would have to refuse, and that would make them remember that they were different: a holy people who belonged to God.

Some of the laws in Leviticus have to do with relationships between people, but even those are designed to keep them pure and holy. Of course, the people will sometimes break the laws God gives them, so there are instructions for offerings to make atonement for their sins.

The laws in Exodus and Leviticus together gave the people of Israel a form of government unique in the world. They would be a holy people, governed not by kings but by God himself.

Even this manual of holiness, however, was not enough to keep the people faithful. As they would soon prove, their hearts were too hard for the laws God had given them.

### Leviticus (Va-Yikrah)



This parchment (sheep skin) scroll from the Dead Sea Scroll Collection contains the final chapters (22-27) of Leviticus, ca. late second-early first century B.C. It is written in ancient Hebrew script. The uniform strokes indicate an experienced and rhythmic hand of a single scribe. It measures 4 1/2" high by 39 1/2" long.





Wilderness of Zin. In this wilderness, Israel was guilty of murmuring against the LORD (Nm 27:14).

## In The Wilderness

- **Spies come back from Canaan with a pessimistic report.**
- **The people despair and rebel.**
- **As punishment for their lack of faith, the rebellious generation will not enter the Promised Land.**
- **Moses loses patience and shares the people's punishment.**

The next book after Leviticus is a history of Israel's failure to live up to the Law. The title in English is Numbers, because it contains a census of all the tribes of Israel. In Hebrew tradition the book is called "In the Wilderness," and that is a good description of its contents. The book tells how Israel spent forty years wandering through the wilderness between Egypt and the Promised Land.

Why forty years? It was not a terribly long journey: about eleven days under normal circumstances (see Dt 1:2). They knew where they were going. Why did it take them forty years to get there?

The answer is simple: they failed to trust God.

When they came near the Promised Land, Moses sent spies to check out the land and bring back a report.<sup>2</sup>

The report they came back with should have been encouraging. The land was "flowing with milk and honey"—every good thing was there. In fact, they brought back a bunch of grapes so huge it took two men to carry it strung up on a pole.<sup>3</sup>

So far it sounded like paradise. "Yet the people who dwell in the land are strong," the spies continued, "and the cities are fortified and very large, and besides we saw the descendants of Anak there."<sup>4</sup> (The descendants of Anak were a tribe of people who seemed frighteningly tall to the Israelites.) Most of the spies believed the task before them was impossible: Israel could never conquer Canaan.

Two of the spies, Caleb and Joshua, were confident that Israel could conquer the land. But the rest of the spies despaired. "We are not able to go up against the people," they said, "for they are stronger than we."<sup>5</sup>

Of course, the people of Israel believed the pessimists. Once again, they turned against Moses. "Would that we had died in the land of Egypt! Or would that we had died in this wilderness! Why does the LORD bring us into this land, to fall by the sword? Our wives and our little ones will become prey; would it not be better for us to go back to Egypt?"<sup>6</sup>

Only Joshua and Caleb had faith in God. "If the LORD delights in us," they said, "he will bring us into this land and give it to us, a land which flows with milk and honey. Only, do not rebel against the LORD; and do not fear the people of the land, for they are bread for us; their protection is removed from them, and the LORD is with us; do not fear them."<sup>7</sup>



Instead of listening to Joshua and Caleb, the people tried to stone them to death. The people had no faith, and God granted their wish to die in the wilderness.

**Say to them, "As I live," says the LORD, "what you have said in my hearing I will do to you: your dead bodies shall fall in this wilderness; and all of your number, numbered from twenty years old and upward, who have murmured against me, not one shall come into the land where I swore that I would make you dwell, except Caleb the son of Jephunneh and Joshua the son of Nun. But your little ones, who you said would become a prey, I will bring in, and they shall know the land which you have despised." (Nm 14: 28-31)**

All the people who had wished to die in the wilderness would get their wish. They would spend the next forty years wandering in the wilderness. Only Caleb and Joshua would live long enough to enter the Promised Land.

So for the next forty years, the people wandered in the wilderness. All that time, they grumbled and sometimes openly rebelled. Finally even Moses lost patience with them. Unable to find water, the people yet again grumbled against Moses: "Why have you made us come up out of Egypt, to bring us to this evil place?"<sup>8</sup> God told Moses and Aaron to speak to a rock, and it would give them water. But Moses was angry, and he did not follow God's instructions. "Hear now, you rebels," he shouted to the people; "shall we bring forth water for you out of this rock?"<sup>9</sup> Then he struck the rock twice with his staff.

Water came pouring out of the rock, but God was not pleased with Moses and Aaron. Moses had not done as God said; he had struck the rock in anger, as though he himself were bringing the water out of it, rather than speaking to it and showing that all the power came from God alone. "Because you did not believe in me, to sanctify me in the eyes of the people of Israel, therefore you shall not bring this assembly into the land which I have given them."<sup>10</sup> Moses and Aaron would never set foot in the Promised Land.

## The Constitution Of Israel

- **Israel falls into idolatry again at Beth-peor.**
- **In Deuteronomy, Moses gives the people a new constitution for the state of Israel.**
- **Many laws in Deuteronomy make concessions to Israel's hard hearts.**
- **Deuteronomy is also a prophetic road map for Israel's history.**
- **Like the U.S. Constitution, Deuteronomy is amended as times change.**

After forty years, all the people who had refused to go into Canaan were dead. But their children, the next generation, were no better—as they would soon prove.

Coming into the land of Moab, the men of Israel began to associate with the Moabite women. The Moabites invited their new husbands and boyfriends to go worship their god Baal with them. (Some historians believe that the cult of Baal of Peor required women to prostitute themselves at the god's temple, which gives you an idea what kind of "worship" might have been going on.) And so the people of Israel once again forgot all about their covenant with God. They went and sacrificed to Baal of Peor.<sup>11</sup> "While Israel dwelt in Shittim the people began to play the harlot with the daughters of Moab" (Nm 25:1).

Because Phinehas, the grandson of Aaron, was faithful to God, punishing the idolaters, God promised that the office of high priest would always belong to his descendants.<sup>12</sup> But because of their faithlessness, God would have to give the people of Israel a second law.

"Deuteronomy," the title we give to the last book of the Pentateuch, means just that: "Second Law." Instead of laws spoken directly in the voice of God, these laws come in the words of Moses.

You remember that when the United States declared its independence, the new nation tried at first to live under a set of laws called "Articles of Confederation." But the Articles were not strong enough. The United States almost fell apart. The founders of the new country decided they needed a new law to hold the country together: the Constitution of the United States.

It was the same way with Israel. After the Exodus—Israel's declaration of independence—the nation tried to live under the code of laws in Exodus and Leviticus. But it wasn't enough. The nation needed a new constitution, and that constitution is in Deuteronomy. After forty years of rebellions, Moses had figured out what God knew all along: Israel wasn't ready to be a nation of priests. Deuteronomy gave them the constitution they needed to be just another nation-state.

Deuteronomy was also a lower law, a law that made concessions to Israel's hard hearts. For example, Moses now allowed divorce (see Dt 24:1-4). "For your hardness of heart Moses allowed you to divorce your wives," Jesus would explain to the Pharisees, "but from the beginning it was not so."<sup>13</sup> Genocidal warfare now will also be part of the conquest of the Promised Land, and the second law provides for that evil (see Dt 20:16-18). At Baal-peor, the people had proved that they couldn't live side by side with idolaters without turning away from the True God.

The prophet Ezekiel was thinking of the laws in Deuteronomy when he wrote, conveying the word of God, "I gave them statutes that were not good and ordinances by which they could not have life."<sup>14</sup> What does it mean that God gave "statutes that were not good"? It means that, instead of teaching Israel the way to holiness, the lower law takes into account the certainty that Israel will not always be holy. The new laws regulate a people who will certainly fall away from the good laws God gave them before.

Deuteronomy is more than just a constitution; it is also a prophetic road map for Israel. After forty years, Moses had figured out what God always knew: that the people of Israel would always be

tempted by foreign gods, and that their weakness would lead to the destruction of the nation. But Moses also knew that God would not let Israel be completely destroyed. The Israelites would lose everything because of their faithlessness, but their loss would turn their hearts back to God.

Finally, just like the United States Constitution, Deuteronomy can be amended. Later, Joshua and Samuel added to the Book of the Law when Israel's circumstances changed. In the case of Deuteronomy, of course, the work of one divinely inspired prophet could be amended only by another divinely inspired prophet. Amendments were made in later centuries, even the Deuteronomic Code under Josiah.

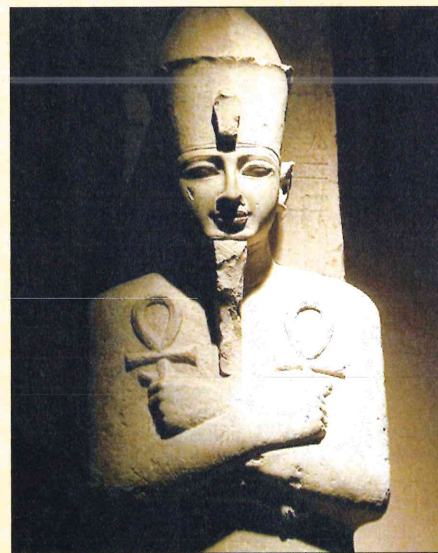
## Israel And America

One way of remembering the steps in the founding of Israel is to compare it with the establishment of the United States. Both nations followed similar processes in their emergence as independent nations. This is a simple comparison between the development of two very different nations, and it is only intended to serve as an analogy. Any further comparisons may render a simplistic or incorrect understanding of the history of either nation. But the successive steps shown below offer an easy way to remember Bible History.

| <b>United States</b>   | <b>Israel</b>  |
|--|--|
| <b>Colonies oppressed by King George III</b>                         | <b>Tribes oppressed by Pharaoh</b>                                     |
| <b>Escaped from tyranny through Declaration of Independence</b>      | <b>Escaped from tyranny through Exodus</b>                             |
| <b>Temporary government under Articles of Confederation</b>          | <b>Temporary government under Leviticus</b>                            |
| <b>Final form of government in Constitution of the United States</b> | <b>Final form of government in Deuteronomy</b>                         |
| <b>States amend the Constitution to deal with new circumstances</b>  | <b>God's prophets amend Deuteronomy to deal with new circumstances</b> |



**King George III**



**Pharaoh**

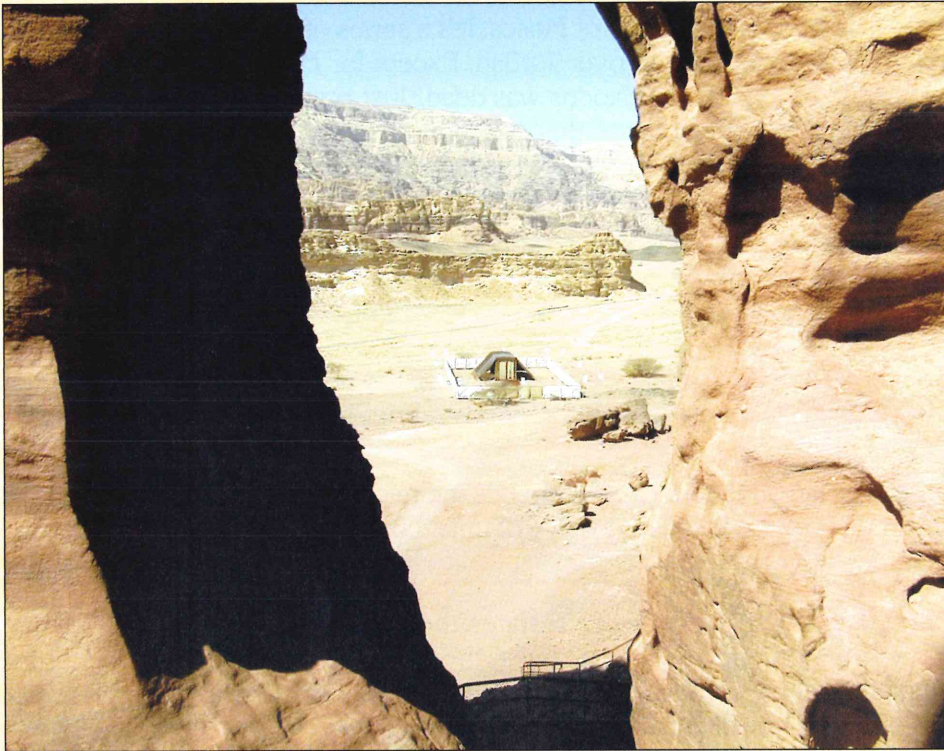
## A Close Look At Deuteronomy

Most of Deuteronomy is written in the words of Moses. It's a series of speeches Moses gave to the Israelites when they had reached the river Jordan. Except for Moses, Joshua, and Caleb, the whole generation that had left Egypt in the Exodus was dead. Just across the river was Canaan, and the time would soon come for them to cross the river and take the land God had promised them. When that happened, they would need the new constitution Moses was about to give them. Moses begins by summarizing the history of Israel's wanderings in the wilderness. The introduction explains what makes this new law necessary: Israel's continuous rebellion and unfaithfulness.

### OUTLINE OF DEUTERONOMY

- I. **Chapters 1-4: Moses' introductory speech.** Almost all the people who had come out of Egypt with Moses were dead. The new generation needs a brief history lesson before Moses can give them the law.
  - Chapters 1-3:** Historical introduction. Moses reminds the new generation how they came to be where they are, and shows how Israel's history of unfaithfulness makes this law necessary.
  - Chapter 4:** Reasons for obeying the law.
- II. **Chapters 5-11: The Law of Sinai.** Moses restates the most important parts of the law, including the Ten Commandments. He also gives the new generation some historical background, reminding them how God was faithful to their parents but their parents were not faithful to God. Some important highlights:
  - Chapter 5: 7-21.** The Ten Commandments.
  - Chapter 6: 4-5.** The Great Commandment. "Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God is one LORD; and you shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might."
  - Chapter 7: 1-5.** Law of separation from the Canaanites.
  - Chapter 9: 7-29.** A reminder of the Golden Calf incident.
  - Chapter 10: 12-13.** What God requires. "And now, O Israel, what does the LORD require of you, but to fear the LORD your God, to walk in all his ways, to love him, to serve the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul, and to keep the commandments and statutes of the LORD, which I command you this day for your good?"
- III. **Chapters 12-26: The Constitution of Israel.** This is the heart of Deuteronomy, the new law for living "in the land which the LORD, the God of your fathers, has given you to possess, all the days that you live upon the earth."<sup>15</sup>
- IV. **Chapter 27: The ratification ceremony.** When Israel reaches the Promised Land, the people will ratify their new constitution in a ceremony that invokes curses on anyone who breaks the law.
- V. **Chapters 28-30: The prophetic road map.** Moses shows Israel what its future history will be. They will forsake the Lord and bring the curses upon themselves, but divine blessing and future restoration will follow.
- VI. **Chapters 31-34: The last days of Moses.** Moses leaves Israel his last words in the form of two songs that the people are to remember forever. Then he sees the Promised Land, but only from a distance. He dies, and God himself buries him in a secret grave, to prevent the Israelites from turning the grave of Moses into a site for idolatrous worship of their great prophet.

## The Tabernacle In The Wilderness



At Timna Park, in Israel's southern desert, the Negev, a life-size replica of the Biblical Tabernacle has been constructed. The model is accurate in every measurement, proportion and color based upon the Biblical description. (with the exception that precious metals were not used e.g., gold, silver.)

The model, measuring 75 feet by 150 feet is complete with altar, ritual bath, Holy of Holies and other elements mentioned in the Book of Exodus.

It stands near Solomon's Pillars, the impressive russet sandstone formations that have made Timna Park and the Timna copper mines famous throughout the region.

*"The length of the court shall be a hundred cubits, the breadth fifty, and the height five cubits, with hangings of fine twined linen and bases of bronze."* (Ex 27:18)



The Outer Court: The bronze laver and bronze altar were located in the outer court. The altar was 7.5 feet square and 4.5 feet high, made of acacia wood overlaid with bronze, and had a horn on each corner. The fire on the altar was to be kept burning at all times and the daily sacrifices were offered in the morning and afternoon.

The Altar of Incense:  
Also known as the "golden altar" or the "inner altar," this three-foot high altar was the location of regular incense offerings. Every morning and evening when tending the light of the menorah, the priests would offer a mixture of frankincense and other aromatic gums. On the Day of Atonement, the high priest would sprinkle blood on the horns of this altar.



"The Holy of Holies" at the temple of Arad, 9th century B.C.

## SUPPLEMENTARY READING

**Commentary, Introduction to Leviticus § 4**

Behind the various sacrifices or offerings, it describes lies a deep conviction that God is the Lord of all creation. Man's physical needs are such that he has recourse to God by means of rites and offerings closely connected with the world on which he depends. Thus, when the people are leading a nomadic existence in the desert, their sacrifice consists of an animal taken from the flock. Later, when they are more typically tillers of the soil, they add further sacrifices and offer agricultural produce, the first-fruits. However, animal offerings continued to have pride of place, on account of the value attaching to animals and the symbolism involved (especially in the sheddings of blood). Sacrifice was the highest act of worship, the best way man could show his feelings towards God—adoration, recognition, gratitude and supplication.

Besides, in all ancient peoples man's religious sense always expressed itself in some form of ceremonial worship.

This explains why, albeit in a way peculiar to it, the chosen people had a system of worship in which it performed certain rites to show that it acknowledged and worshiped the God of Israel. The rules surrounding this worship took shape over time. Initially certain basic rites developed and, alongside them, the requirement that they be performed by a person with a certain authority, someone who would be the people's representative before God.

In other words, the need for a

priesthood emerged, and for persons to exercise that priesthood, that is, *priests*. In the early stages of the people of Israel, it was the father of the family who performed the liturgy. Once the monarchy was established, this role passed to the king: his role was both royal and priestly. Later still, priestly functions became the preserve of people who had this special role—Eleazar and Zadok, for example, in David's time, and later on Zadok's descendants, the Zadokites, who exercised the high priesthood.

In the Levitical system, the laws concerning *cleanness* (purity) and *holiness* also contain profound teaching which extends much further than the formalism which is apparent at first sight. We need to see that anything unsuitable for the worship of God was considered to be "unclean." God is pure, beautiful, the source of health and life; and nothing dirty, harmful or dead can gain access to him. "Purity" or cleanness, then, is something external and ritual, but it had very much to do with man's relationship with God. For its part, "holiness" is that inaccessible dwelling place of the mystery of God (cf. CCC 2809); it is just possible to glimpse that holiness through the way God's majesty shines out in the things that he has created and in his interventions in history.

*The chosen people had a system of worship in which it performed certain rites to show that it acknowledged and worshiped the God of Israel.*



VOCABULARY

**CALEB**

One of the spies sent to Canaan. Only he and Joshua had faith in God's promise to deliver the land to Israel.

**CALF, GOLDEN**

An idol made by Aaron when the Israelites demanded it. The people worshiped it as the god that had brought them out of Egypt.

**CONSTITUTION**

The fundamental law that governs a nation. The law in Deuteronomy would serve as the constitution of the nation of Israel.

**DEUTERONOMY**

Greek for "second law." The name of the book that contains the laws that would become the constitution of the state of Israel. It also restates many of the important laws given earlier, including the Ten Commandments.

**GENOCIDE**

The destruction of an entire people. Genocidal warfare was one of the evil consequences of Israel's lack of faith.

**JOSHUA**

One of the spies sent to Canaan; only he and Caleb had faith in God's promise to deliver the land to Israel. He would be Moses' successor as leader of Israel.

**LEVITES**

Members of the tribe of Levi, who would be the priests for the rest of Israel.

**LEVITICUS**

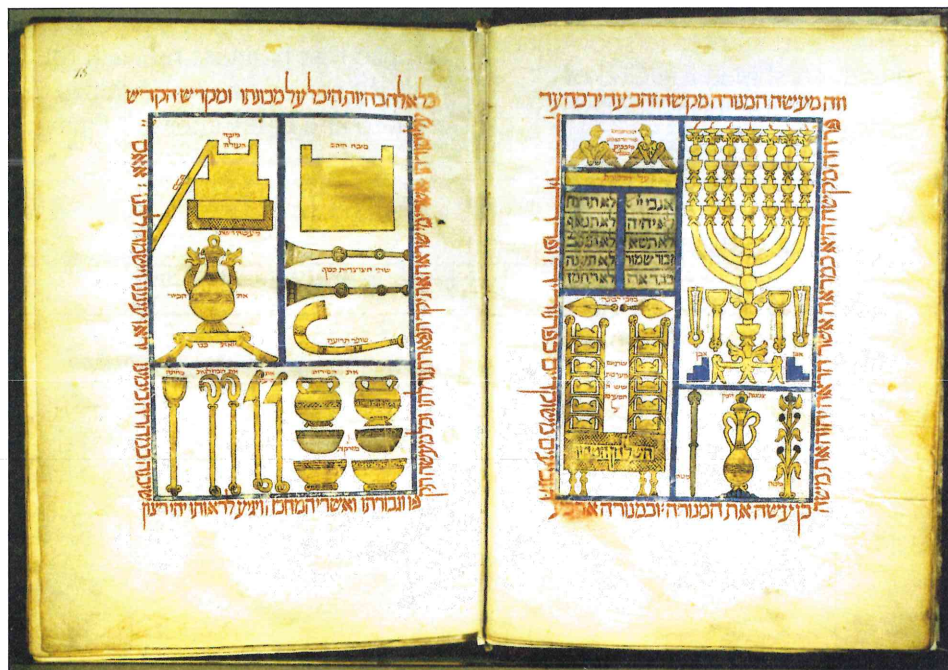
The priestly book containing the laws designed to make Israel a holy people.

**PRIEST**

A man dedicated to the service of God. Israel was meant to be a nation of priests; but, after the incident of the Golden Calf, the tribe of Levi was chosen for the priesthood.

**YHWH**

The Name of God in Hebrew, usually rendered Yahweh or Jehovah and translated "LORD" in many English Bible versions. (Hebrew was written with only consonants.)



"Now even the first covenant had regulations for worship and an earthly sanctuary. For a tent was prepared, the outer one, in which were the lampstand and the table and the bread of the Presence; it is called the Holy Place." (Heb 9:1-2)



## STUDY QUESTIONS

1. Why did Moses make concessions regarding God's law?
2. Where did Aaron get the gold to make the Golden Calf?
3. What Egyptian god did the Golden Calf resemble?
4. What opportunity did God offer Moses when Israel turned away to worship the Golden Calf?
5. Why was Israel spared from God's wrath after worshiping the Golden Calf?
6. What was the symbol of the broken tablets?
7. What were Moses' orders for the Levites who were still loyal to God?
8. Which tribe became the priests of the nation, mediating between God and Israel?
9. Why did God make the Israelites abide by so many new laws after their fall in Exodus?
10. What was the purpose of the laws of ritual purity?
11. Where did the Levites obtain the instructions they needed to write the book of Leviticus?
12. What does Leviticus mean?
13. What was the purpose of the laws God gave to Israel in Leviticus?
14. What did some of the Levitical laws cover?
15. What is the book of Numbers called in the Hebrew tradition?
16. Why didn't Israel go straight into the Promised Land?
17. Who were Caleb and Joshua?
18. What was Israel's punishment for refusing to believe that Canaan could be conquered with God's help?
19. Why was Moses never to be allowed in the Promised Land?
20. What does Deuteronomy mean, literally?

## PRACTICAL EXERCISES

1. The Church teaches that while the Levite priesthood of the Old Testament was "instituted to proclaim the Word of God and to restore communion with God by sacrifices and prayer, this priesthood nevertheless remains powerless to bring about salvation, needing to repeat its sacrifices ceaselessly and being unable to achieve a definitive sanctification, which only the sacrifice of Christ would accomplish" (CCC 1540). How are priests in the Church today different from these Levite priests? What is the purpose of the priesthood in the Catholic Church? What are some ways we can take advantage of the help priests have to offer us as we work toward the salvation that has been won for us?
2. The text compares Israel's sin of idolatry with the Golden Calf to the original sin of Adam and Eve because it destroyed a unique relationship with God. Review the first chapter of this book and list as many similarities as you can between both the original sin and Israel's sin and the consequences that followed from them.
3. Why do you think God's love and compassion for his people is so often rejected, even when it means an end to their suffering? How do you think the prophets felt when faced with a disbelieving people? When faced with unbelieving peers, how would you try to help them find faith in God?

FROM THE CATECHISM

**62** After the patriarchs, God formed Israel as his people by freeing them from slavery in Egypt. He established with them the covenant of Mount Sinai and, through Moses, gave them his law so that they would recognize him and serve him as the one living and true God, the provident Father and just judge, and so that they would look for the promised Savior (cf. DV 3).

**1975** According to Scripture the Law is a fatherly instruction by God which prescribes for man the ways that lead to the promised beatitude, and proscribes the ways of evil.

**1981** The Law of Moses contains many truths naturally accessible to reason. God has revealed them because men did not read them in their hearts.

**2112** The first commandment condemns *polytheism*. It requires man neither to believe in, nor to venerate, other divinities than the one true God. Scripture constantly recalls this rejection of “idols, [of] silver and gold, the work of men’s hands. They have mouths, but do not speak; eyes, but do not see.” These empty idols make their worshippers empty: “Those who make them are like them; so are all who trust in them” (Ps 115: 4-5, 8; cf. Is 44: 9-20; Jer 10: 1-16; Dn 14: 1-30; Bar 6; Wis 13: 1-15; 19). God, however, is the “living God” (Jos 3: 10; Ps 42: 3; etc.) who gives life and intervenes in history.

**2114** Human life finds its unity in the adoration of the one God. The commandment to worship the Lord alone integrates man and saves him from an endless disintegration. Idolatry is a perversion of man’s innate religious sense. An idolater is someone who “transfers his indestructible notion of God to anything other than God” (Origen, *Contra Celsum* 2, 40: PG 11, 861).

**2132** The Christian veneration of images is not contrary to the first commandment which proscribes idols. Indeed, “the honor rendered to an image passes to its prototype,” and “whoever venerates an image venerates the person portrayed in it” (St. Basil, *De Spiritu Sancto* 18, 45: PG 32, 149C; Council of Nicaea II: DS 601; cf. Council of Trent: DS 1821-1825; Vatican Council II: *Sacrosanctum Concilium* 126; LG 67). The honor paid to sacred images is a “respectful veneration,” not the adoration due to God alone:

Religious worship is not directed to images in themselves, considered as mere things, but under their distinctive aspect as images leading us on to God incarnate. The movement toward the image does not terminate in it as image, but tends toward that whose image it is (St. Thomas Aquinas, *STh* II-II, 81, 3 ad 3).

Endnotes

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| 1. Lv 10: 1.  | 6. Nm 14: 2-3. | 11. Nm 25: 1-3.  |
| 2. Nm 13.     | 7. Nm 14: 8-9. | 12. Nm 25: 7-13. |
| 3. Nm 13: 23. | 8. Nm 20: 5.   | 13. Mt 19: 8.    |
| 4. Nm 13: 28. | 9. Nm 20: 10.  | 14. Ez 20: 25.   |
| 5. Nm 13: 31. | 10. Nm 20: 12. | 15. Dt 12: 1.    |

