

**LITERARY OVERVIEW**

Author: Moses as primary writer and compiler.

Audience: Israel as they prepare to enter into the land of promise.

Purpose: To record the historical events of the deliverance of Israel and to give the original content of God's requirements to them. This becomes the great redemptive story which is celebrated and remembered by the nation. This historical event is later seen as a shadow or type of New Covenant redemption, and Moses as a prototype of the Jesus as the great Prophet.

Plotline: Israel is delivered from their slavery and suffering in Egypt under a human king through the Prophet Moses. They are taken to Mount Sinai where they receive the Law of God which will direct their new way of life in service to the LORD God. The main purpose of all of this is the glory of God.

Main Events: The calling of Moses, the plagues, the escape from Egypt, Mt. Sinai.

Main Characters: God, Moses, Pharaoh.

Form/Genre: Narrative, civil law code, regulations for worship.

Challenges:

- 1.) The change from exciting narrative to law codes and regulations.
- 2.) Learning what and how to apply the laws given to Israel.
  - The NT usage of the Decalogue and particular applications.
- 3.) Responding to the attacks of skeptics.
  - the combination of miraculous events with natural connections

**PHASE 1: THE DELIVERANCE OF ISRAEL****I. THE NEED FOR A DELIVERER –1:1-22**

The people of Israel (Jacob's sons) come into Egypt with about 70 people due to the mercy of Joseph and Pharaoh to save them from extinction from a famine. While there they increase greatly in number so that a later Pharaoh begins to fear them, that they will rebel and fight against them.

In response, the king establishes laws over time that makes the Jews slaves and gives them the task of building the mighty buildings of that age (perhaps including the pyramids).

When we keep in mind all of Old Testament history, this should strike us as a bit odd. This is the only instance where this kind of oppression is not connected to Israel's disobedience. In the flow of the story it is also odd, seeing that God had made such promises for the prosperity and blessing of Abraham's descendents. Yet, God had also told Abraham that this was going to happen:

*Then He said to Abram: "Know certainly that your descendants will be strangers in a land that is not theirs, and will serve them, and they will afflict them four hundred years. (Genesis 15:13)*

As odd or inefficient as it may at first seem, God planned for this to happen, and had his purposes in it. As in many things in our life, God intends to use the backdrop of difficulty to display His glory. God also tells Abraham of what the outcome will be:

*And also the nation whom they serve I will judge; afterward they shall come out with great possessions. (Genesis 15:14)*

Similar to the story of Joseph, what he went through on a smaller scale would happen to all the nation. They would be in slavery and suffering, but would come out to display the glory of the LORD.

This slavery continues for 400 years (America has only existed for only 232 years), and generations come and go. Surely during this time there were people we remembered the promises of God to Abraham, and prayed for mercy. Yet the suffering continued.

The oppression of the Hebrews didn't seem to be working. We are told "the more they were oppressed, the more they multiplied and the more they spread abroad." (v.12). By the time of the Exodus we are told that there were about 600,000 men (12:37) not including women and children. So Pharaoh devises another plan. He commands that the midwives Shiphrah and Puah, who help deliver the children (and are possibly the overseers of that profession) to kill the Hebrew boys as they are born in an effort of population control. Out of the fear of God this disobey the king, and the people continue to flourish and God gave those women their own families. Note that while the specific name of the Pharaoh is never mentioned in all the book, the names of these two dear women are recorded and we know them today. God measures greatness in a different way than men.

The violence escalates, and now what Pharaoh tried to do secretly becomes a social edict. The Egyptian citizens, when seeing Jewish children, are to cast them into the Nile river. Imagine the overall atmosphere of living in such a culture. Many boys would be killed, and the people continued to cry out to God "how long!"

**II. THE PREPARATION OF A DELIVERER****A. Birth and Deliverance of Moses – 2:1-10**

In this setting, a most ironic event takes place. As Pharaoh is attempting to oppress and keep the Israelites in bondage, his own household becomes the home of the one who will deliver them.

We know the story well of a Hebrew woman who sends her infant child with his sister to the Nile river and sets him in a waterproofed basket. Pharaoh's own daughter spots the child floating and sends her servant to fetch

him. After returning him to his mother to be nursed, he is eventually brought into Pharaoh's household and adopted as daughter's son (his grandson).

In that household Moses receives the finest training available. We are told in Acts 7:21 that he "was instructed in all the wisdom of the Egyptians, and he was mighty in his words and deeds." There is was raised in the place of opulence and wealth.

### **B. His Flight Into the Wilderness – 2:11-25**

Like the life of Christ, there is very little else that we are told about Moses' childhood. He suddenly appears grown up in v.11. As a matter of fact, it seems that he is 40 years old at this time. We can only imagine the details of his life were. When did he realize that he was a Jew? How did Pharaoh tolerate him in the household? (probably the influence of a daughter on a father's heart has something to do with it) Did he have a sense in the incident with the Egyptian and the slave that he was called to enact justice for God's people, and was this his own attempt at beginning a deliverance of them? We are not told, and can only speculate.

What we know is that he responds to a situation involving the beating of a Jewish slave, and tries to secretly kill the Egyptian and hide his body in the sand. This doesn't go as he had hoped, and he is sentenced to death by Pharaoh and Moses flees into the land of Midian. Midian was a son of Abraham by his concubine Keturah. Midian had four sons, and their land stretched from east of the Jordan River and the Dead sea down into the Sinai peninsula. It was in this more southern region that Moses flees.

It is there that Moses is received into the people of Jethro in response to his kindness to his daughters (remember, he is 40 years old), and marries one of them. He settles there for 40 years and helps to tend Jethro's flock.

During this period, that Pharaoh dies and the people of Israel continue to cry out to God for rescue. God hears their groaning and is preparing to call a prophet and deliverer.

### **C. His Call from God – 3:1-4:31**

After those 40 years, Moses is tending the flock of his father-in-law when God of Abraham, Isaac, an Jacob appears to Him in a theophany (the appearance of the invisible God in a visible form). He tells Moses that He has heard the groans of His people, and that he will be the one who will be the human instrument to confront Pharaoh and deliver the people from their slavery.

Moses initially objects, but finally succumbs to the Lord's call. Aaron is also called as the mouthpiece of Moses, who considers himself to be lacking the rhetorical skills to convince Pharaoh.

So Moses returns to Egypt, has a counsel with the elders of the people and his brother, and begins the engagement with the king of the Egyptians.

## **III. THE WORK OF THE DELIVERER**

### **A. Initial Failure – 5:1-22**

Things do not start out smoothly, and the initial encounter only makes Pharaoh perturbed, and he assigns even greater difficulty for the Israelites. This only upsets them, and they turn on Moses in anger. They wish judgment on him for what he has done, essentially saying that he has helped Pharaoh kill them (v.21).

Moses in turn speaks to God, asking why He has done this thing. He says plainly "you have not delivered your people at all." This is not a surprise to God, as He has already told Moses that this was going to happen, and that Pharaoh would not initially listen to God's command (3:19).

### **B. The Painful Process – 6:1-13:22**

After this apparent failure, God affirms what He is going to do, and sends Moses and Aaron again into the presence of Pharaoh. Thus begins the cycles of plagues that afflict the land, and eventually hones in on just the Egyptians. The plagues include (1.) turning water into blood, (2.) deluge of frogs, (3.) deluge of gnats, (4.) deluge of flies, (5.) the death of livestock, (6.) affliction of boils on people and animals, (7.) a barrage of hail that kills people and destroys crops, and (8.) an attack of locusts which finish off the budding crops. While we are told the details, it is likely that these various judgments are actually judgments on the variety of Egyptian gods.

Through these plagues there are cycles of responses from Pharaoh which include refusal, affliction, plea, negotiation, promise, but ultimately change of mind to refusal. There is also the dual theme of Pharaoh hardening his heart as well as God hardening Pharaoh's heart.

The Lord isn't done, and has designed one last devastating judgment on the Egyptians: the plague of the firstborn in all of Egypt, both human and animals. In conjunction with this night of horror God gives a ritual meal that will be repeated by the Jews through the ages, and will be a means of their deliverance from that death known as the Passover.

The terrifying night comes, and the firstborn of every family mysteriously dies as the Angel of the Lord moves through the land, passing over the Jewish homes where the blood of the sacrificial lamb has been smeared on the thresholds of the home.

Pharaoh finally gives in, and the Egyptian people send out the slaves, giving them great treasures in the process. God appears in a cloud and a pillar of fire to lead them where He wants them to go.

**C. The Red Sea – 14:1-15:21**

Just when you thought things were going well, we are told that Pharaoh changes his mind. He has just lost his manual labor workforce, and decides to pursue them and bring them back. This brings us to the confrontation at the Red Sea, where God sends a wind to part the waters while His presence in the pillar of fire shields the Israelites. Moses and the people pass through the middle of the sea, and when Pharaoh's army tries the same the waters return and they are destroyed. We are told in a quite vivid verse "and Israel saw the Egyptians dead on the seashore" (v.30).

This scene is followed by song (like a musical) both by Moses as well as his sister and her group of dancing and singing women.

**PHASE 2: THE ESTABLISHMENT OF ISRAEL****I. THE JOURNEY TO SINAI – 15:22-19:25**

Now that they are safe from the previous captors, Israel begins the journey to the place where God has chosen to speak to them and give them directions as His chosen nation. On the journey the Lord provides for them food, water, and initial military victory, leadership for the people under Moses. This brings them to the foot of the mountain, and preparations are made for God to speak to the people.

**II. THE LAWS OF SINAI**

Israel has been in bondage and under the law of the Egyptian Pharaohs now for 4 centuries. Their way of life, work habits, views of marriage and family, understanding of slavery, diet, forms of worship, and general understanding of right and wrong have been dominantly informed by this Pagan culture. Up to this point in the history of the Bible, while there have been commands to individuals, never has there been (as far as what was recorded) a body of requirements and laws to a nation.

God intends for His people, at least at this stage of redemptive history, to look and act a certain way. Some of those ways will seem to us unusual. Yet God has rescued them, and now like a people who have been rescued from slavery by a great king, they are called to voluntarily obey the laws of that king who has been gracious to them.

From chapter 20 to the end the bulk of what is written was for the directing of the life of the nation of Israel, especially as they prepare to enter into the land that was promised to Abraham.

**A. The Decalogue – 20:1-20**

It has been noted by some biblical scholars that the form of what is delivered here is similar to something called a suzerainty treaty. This was a document offered to a people conquered by a king as to the conditions of ongoing blessing from him, or the punishment if they did not follow his laws. There are certainly similarities.

Something to be noted about the Decalogue ("ten words"), also called the Ten Commandments, is that they *alone* are spoken by the very voice of God at Mt. Sinai (Deuteronomy 5:22), are written on stone tablets, are rewritten on a second set of tablets when Moses breaks the first set (Deuteronomy 10:2) and are put into the Ark of the Covenant (Deuteronomy 10:5). They clearly play a more prominent role than do the other laws that are given to Israel.

These commandments are well known by Christians, and are usually divided into two sections: our duty to God (#1-4) and our duty to others (#6-10).

**B. The Application of the Law – 20:21-24:18**

In response to the Lord speaking the Decalogue to Israel, they plead with Moses not to allow God to speak to them again, lest they die (vv.18-19). God agrees, and then speaks to Moses words that he is then in turn to deliver to the people (v.22).

What follows in this section are some specific applications of the general commands laid down in the Decalogue. They are not meant to be exhaustive, but instruction to help Moses and the leaders to rule in Israel. There are many things that are particularly applicable to the culture, but will still have in them principles that apply in a secondary way to even the New Testament church.

One example of this is the command found in another (yet connected) set of law codes found in Deuteronomy 25:4, "You shall not muzzle an ox while it treads out the grain." The first application is that an ox, while working, has right to eat of what he is treading out. To deprive him of food while you take food from his labor would be unjust. We might ask if this is a law that we can bypass completely. Is it true of an ox, but not another work beast? Since it is just a general example, it would apply in another case as well. What is most interesting is that in the New Testament this verse is applied specifically to the provision of material goods for ministers of the Gospel (1Corinthians 9:9 and 1Timothy 5:18).

As a result, the simple doing away with Old Testament verses because they don't seem to directly apply to our situation is challenged, and we begin the work of applying the whole Word of God by the help of His Spirit.

**C. The Regulation of Worship – 25:1-40:38**

After addressing primarily "civil" laws, this section addresses the regulation of God's worship. Having come out of Egypt, being familiar with many false practices in worship, God lays out in great detail what He expects to happen in the place of the Tabernacle, the traveling House of worship.

We have here instructions on how the tabernacle is to be built, what furniture is to be place there (the table of showbread, the lampstand, the altar of incense), the kinds of altars, what kind of offerings are to be made, the Sabbath, the establishment of the priesthood, what they must wear, etc.

Reading all of this may be tedious to some of us, but it again roots us in a real-world setting, realizing that people really did make these things and use them in the worship of God. It tells us about the great care an artisanship that was put into God's worship. It also tells us that God sent His Spirit to give men like Bezalel wisdom and understanding to be excellent creators of those items.

As a side note, it was just a few years ago, when I was much more skeptical about the place of art in the life of Christians, when I realized a stunning fact. It is clear that God forbids in the Decalogue the making of the image of anything (including things "above) to worship. This is especially pertinent in light of the fact that Israel has come out of the idolatry of Egypt. However, one of the things that God commands is the creation of images of angel to put on the Ark of the Covenant and the weaving of the temple curtains. What seems clear is that while the worship of such images is forbidden, the making of them is not (necessarily).

In the midst of all of these directions, we have in ch.32 the embarrassing event of the worship of the Golden Calf. It seems that one of the reasons this event is included (together with Aaron's dumfounding lie about the gold being thrown into the fire and the calf just coming out...his own created myth) is that we are given an example of just how deeply rooted their idolatry is, their quickness to turn from God, and the need for such regulations of His worship.

The book ends with a description of the Glory of the Lord coming down in the presence of the Tabernacle. We are told that when the glory of the Lord was with them, they stayed. When God's glory moved, then they moved. This certainly has a lesson for us. In our daily lives what we desire is to know the glory of the Lord, His presence, His pleasure. For that reason, we seek to follow Him and do as He commands.

### Major Themes

- 1.) We see again in this book, God's great grace toward undeserving people based on His promises.
- 2.) We see Moses as the sovereign God over all, even the most powerful leaders and nations of the earth.
- 3.) We see Moses as a type of Jesus Christ, the great Prophet and Intercessor before God.
- 4.) We see the flaws of a great hero, Moses.