

Learning from Israel: The History

The exodus under Moses signalled the beginning of Israel as a nation. Moreover, within a few weeks of their leaving Egypt, God gave the Israelites his covenant at Sinai. A privileged people, indeed! A distinguished, separated people! As we have seen, the Israelites, assembled in anticipation under the mountain, were as keen as mustard, freely promising full obedience to God's revelation of the covenant to them through Moses :

Moses came and called the elders of the people and set before them all these words that the LORD had commanded him. All the people answered together and said: 'All that the LORD has spoken we will do' (Ex. 19:7-8).

But, as the 17th-century English proverb has it, fine words butter no parsnips.¹ Words are cheap; actions cost more; and count more! And in any case – even in the short time since Moses had returned to the Israelites in Egypt, ending his time in Midian, armed with God's promise of deliverance – the people had shown how quickly they could switch from euphoria to doubt, depression and grumbling (as detailed in Exodus 4 – 17).² Their track record was far from promising.

And so it proved at Sinai: even before the ink (as it were) had dried on the contract, even *before* they had received the law of the covenant, the Israelites in effect broke it by making a calf-idol under Aaron's direction. This was immediately followed by Moses smashing the two tablets, leading to the slaughter of many Israelites (Ex. 32). What a disastrous start to the age of the old covenant!

¹ Making fine promises is easy; what counts is the doing of what is promised. As the old saw has it, actions speak louder than words.

² As those chapters show, Moses himself was not exempt.

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For a brief – but penetratingly honest – outline of what was to come, I turn to Stephen. When put on trial by the Jews, in his defence – rather, his attack – he resolutely hammered home unpalatable truth; the Jews were treating Stephen as their forefathers had treated Moses (and, of course, Christ). Stephen responded:

This Moses, whom they rejected, saying: ‘Who made you a ruler and a judge?’ – this man God sent as both ruler and redeemer by the hand of the angel who appeared to him in the bush. This man led [the Israelites] out, performing wonders and signs in Egypt and at the Red Sea and in the wilderness for forty years. This is the Moses who said to the Israelites: ‘God will raise up for you a prophet like me from your brothers’. This is the one who was in the congregation in the wilderness with the angel who spoke to him at Mount Sinai, and with our fathers. He received living oracles to give to us. Our fathers refused to obey him, but thrust him aside, and in their hearts they turned to Egypt, saying to Aaron: ‘Make for us gods who will go before us. As for this Moses who led us out from the land of Egypt, we do not know what has become of him’. And they made a calf in those days, and offered a sacrifice to the idol and were rejoicing in the works of their hands. But God turned away and gave them over to worship the host of heaven, as it is written in the book of the prophets: ‘Did you bring to me slain beasts and sacrifices, during the forty years in the wilderness, O house of Israel? You took up the tent of Moloch and the star of your god Rephan, the images that you made to worship; and I will send you into exile beyond Babylon’ (Acts 7:35-43).

Stephen, of course, was drawing on such passages as Numbers 11 – 14, in which Moses faithfully recorded Israel’s failures – sins – that came in rapid succession after Sinai, including their unbelief at Kadesh Barnea. That particular sin – when they refused to believe God’s promise, and act upon it – meant that almost an entire generation of Israelites was wasted as the nation wandered in the wilderness under God’s judgment until the disobedient had perished (Ezek. 20:5-26,36). So much so, only two adult Israelites who had been at Sinai survived the wilderness (Num. 14:20-38). Furthermore, even after Israel had crossed the Jordan, Canaan was never fully conquered. Joshua

recorded Israel's (and his) failures over Ai and Gibeon *etc.* Having seen what was going on all around him, and reading the writing on the wall, it is no wonder that Joshua adopted the tone he did in his last sermon. He well-knew that Israel still hankered after (as they chose fondly to remember them) the fleshpots of Egypt. He remembered that under Moses 'the rabble... had a strong craving' (Num. 11:4). And he remembered what the people had said, even with weeping as they expressed their feelings:

Oh that we had meat to eat! We remember the fish we ate in Egypt that cost nothing, the cucumbers, the melons, the leeks, the onions, and the garlic. But now our strength is dried up, and there is nothing at all but this manna to look at (Num. 11:4-6).

The record speaks volumes. Joshua declared:

Now therefore fear the LORD and serve him in sincerity and in faithfulness. Put away the gods that your fathers served beyond the River and in Egypt, and serve the LORD. And if it is evil in your eyes to serve the LORD, choose this day whom you will serve, whether the gods your fathers served in the region beyond the River, or the gods of the Amorites in whose land you dwell. But as for me and my house, we will serve the LORD.

The people glibly replied:

Far be it from us that we should forsake the LORD to serve other gods, for it is the LORD our God who brought us and our fathers up from the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery, and who did those great signs in our sight and preserved us in all the way that we went, and among all the peoples through whom we passed. And the LORD drove out before us all the peoples, the Amorites who lived in the land. Therefore we also will serve the LORD, for he is our God.

Joshua was not fooled! He did not take their promises at face value, and he pulled no punches in telling them so:

You are not able to serve the LORD, for he is a holy God. He is a jealous God; he will not forgive your transgressions or your sins. If you forsake the LORD and serve foreign gods,

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then he will turn and do you harm and consume you, after having done you good.

Nevertheless, the people remained defiant and self-confident:

No, but we will serve the LORD.

Joshua spelled out what was involved in their vows:

You are witnesses against yourselves that you have chosen the LORD, to serve him.

The people remained supremely confident:

We are witnesses.

But Joshua had not finished:

Then put away the foreign gods that are among you, and incline your heart to the LORD, the God of Israel.

Still the people were adamant:

The LORD our God we will serve, and his voice we will obey.

Joshua did all he could to make their commitment watertight:

So Joshua made a covenant with the people that day, and put in place statutes and rules for them at Shechem. And Joshua wrote these words in the book of the law of God. And he took a large stone and set it up there under the terebinth that was by the sanctuary of the LORD.

And he did not mince his words:

Behold, this stone shall be a witness against us, for it has heard all the words of the LORD that he spoke to us. Therefore it shall be a witness against you, lest you deal falsely with your God.

And in this spirit, he brought the day to a close:

So Joshua sent the people away, every man to his inheritance (Josh. 24:14-28).

So much for all that! But, as I say, despite their fine words, Joshua had not been fooled. He could see what was coming. Israel's rapid, sinful descent and betrayal of the covenant after

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Joshua's death is graphically recorded in the book of Judges; the history is abominable, some of it hardly fit for public reading.

And so it went on and on. Israel's history is a record of lowering clouds with occasional rays of watery, temporary sunshine, flattering to deceive. Prophet after prophet rebuked the people, calling them to repentance and reform. All to little avail. Or none! The kingdom divided, with both kingdoms eventually descending into captivity on account of their spiritual adultery.

The psalmist has supplied us with a graphic account of the apostasy of the old-covenant people. It is a long extract – and with good reason: Israel's sins were seemingly endless. Their rebellion began, as we have seen, even at the exodus from Egypt. This is how the psalmist put it as he admitted Israel's grim history before God:

Our fathers, when they were in Egypt, did not consider your wondrous works; they did not remember the abundance of your steadfast love, but rebelled by the sea, at the Red Sea. Yet he saved them for his name's sake, that he might make known his mighty power. He rebuked the Red Sea, and it became dry, and he led them through the deep as through a desert. So he saved them from the hand of the foe and redeemed them from the power of the enemy. And the waters covered their adversaries; not one of them was left. Then they believed his words; they sang his praise.

But they soon forgot his works; they did not wait for his counsel. But they had a wanton craving in the wilderness, and put God to the test in the desert; he gave them what they asked, but sent a wasting disease among them.

When men in the camp were jealous of Moses and Aaron, the holy one of the LORD, the earth opened and swallowed up Dathan, and covered the company of Abiram. Fire also broke out in their company; the flame burned up the wicked.

They made a calf in Horeb and worshipped a metal image. They exchanged the glory of God for the image of an ox that eats grass. They forgot God, their Saviour who had done great things in Egypt, wondrous works in the land of Ham, and awesome deeds by the Red Sea. Therefore he said he would

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destroy them – had not Moses, his chosen one, stood in the breach before him, to turn away his wrath from destroying them.

Then they despised the pleasant land, having no faith in his promise. They murmured in their tents, and did not obey the voice of the LORD. Therefore he raised his hand and swore to them that he would make them fall in the wilderness, and would make their offspring fall among the nations, scattering them among the lands.

Then they yoked themselves to the Baal of Peor, and ate sacrifices offered to the dead; they provoked the LORD to anger with their deeds, and a plague broke out among them. Then Phinehas stood up and intervened, and the plague was stayed. And that was counted to him as righteousness from generation to generation forever.

They angered him at the waters of Meribah, and it went ill with Moses on their account, for they made his spirit bitter, and he spoke rashly with his lips.

They did not destroy the peoples, as the LORD commanded them, but they mixed with the nations and learned to do as they did. They served their idols, which became a snare to them. They sacrificed their sons and their daughters to the demons; they poured out innocent blood, the blood of their sons and daughters, whom they sacrificed to the idols of Canaan, and the land was polluted with blood. Thus they became unclean by their acts, and played the whore in their deeds.

Then the anger of the LORD was kindled against his people, and he abhorred his heritage; he gave them into the hand of the nations, so that those who hated them ruled over them. Their enemies oppressed them, and they were brought into subjection under their power. Many times he delivered them, but they were rebellious in their purposes and were brought low through their iniquity (Ps. 106:7-43).

God reminded Jeremiah of Israel's miserable track record, thus preparing him for the prophetic message he was to deliver to the people:

I brought you [that is, Israel] into a plentiful land to enjoy its fruits and its good things. But when you came in, you defiled my land and made my heritage an abomination (Jer. 2:7).

As God could say, he had been clear in his command and promise, and had not over-burdened the nation:

In the day that I brought them out of the land of Egypt, I did not speak to your fathers or command them concerning burnt offerings and sacrifices. This command I gave them: ‘Obey my voice, and I will be your God, and you shall be my people. And walk in all the way that I command you, that it may be well with you’. But they did not obey or incline their ear, but walked in their own counsels and the stubbornness of their evil hearts, and went backward and not forward. From the day that your fathers came out of the land of Egypt to this day, I have persistently sent all my servants the prophets to them, day after day. Yet they did not listen to me or incline their ear, but stiffened their neck. They did worse than their fathers (Jer. 7:22-26).

Note that:

From the day that your fathers came out of the land of Egypt to this day, I have persistently sent all my servants the prophets to them, day after day.

But all in vain! Indeed, with the passing of time, things went from bad to worse. And God declared:

The children of Israel and the children of Judah have done nothing but evil in my sight from their youth [that is, since they were made a nation at the exodus]. The children of Israel have done nothing but provoke me to anger by the work of their hands, declares the LORD. This city has aroused my anger and wrath, from the day it was built to this day, so that I will remove it from my sight because of all the evil of the children of Israel and the children of Judah that they did to provoke me to anger – their kings and their officials, their priests and their prophets, the men of Judah and the inhabitants of Jerusalem. They have turned to me their back and not their face. And though I have taught them persistently, they have not listened to receive instruction. They set up their abominations in the house that is called by my name, to defile it. They built the high places of Baal in the Valley of the Son of Hinnom, to offer up their sons and daughters to Molech, though I did not command them, nor did it enter into my mind,

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that they should do this abomination, to cause Judah to sin (Jer. 32:30-35).

And, as a consequence, in Jeremiah's day, Judah would be hauled into captivity. And God warned the prophet what he should expect by way of indignant reaction when the people heard the news; more, he told Jeremiah what he had to say in response:

And when you tell this people all these words, and they say to you: 'Why has the LORD pronounced all this great evil against us? What is our iniquity? What is the sin that we have committed against the LORD our God?' then you shall say to them: 'Because your fathers have forsaken me', declares the LORD, 'and have gone after other gods and have served and worshipped them, and have forsaken me and have not kept my law, and because you have done worse than your fathers, for behold, every one of you follows his stubborn, evil will, refusing to listen to me. Therefore I will hurl you out of this land into a land that neither you nor your fathers have known, and there you shall serve other gods day and night, for I will show you no favour' (Jer. 16:10-13).

As God had declared to the northern kingdom, Israel, through Hosea:

Call his [that is, Hosea's second son's] name 'Not my People', for you [that is, Israel] are not my people, and I am not your God (Hos. 1:9).

And:

When Israel was a child, I loved him, and out of Egypt I called my son. The more they were called, the more they went away; they kept sacrificing to the Baals and burning offerings to idols... They shall not return to the land of Egypt, but Assyria shall be their king, because they have refused to return to me (Hos. 11:1-5).³

Although the southern kingdom, Judah, was restored after seventy years in Babylon, things were never the same (Ezra 3:12-13).

³ Among many other passages, see Ezek. 20:1-32.

And so it went on. The post-exile prophets had their work cut out trying to raise Judah to what she ought to have been. In vain! Things had plummeted to such a depth that God used Malachi to lay a very heavy charge against the restored people – the restored people, please note, even *after* their restoration from captivity:

‘A son honours his father, and a servant his master. If then I am a father, where is my honour? And if I am a master, where is my fear?’ says the LORD of hosts to you, O priests, who despise my name. But you say: ‘How have we despised your name?’ ‘By offering polluted food upon my altar’. But you say: ‘How have we polluted you?’ ‘By saying that the LORD’s table may be despised. When you offer blind animals in sacrifice, is that not evil? And when you offer those that are lame or sick, is that not evil? Present that to your governor; will he accept you or show you favour?’ says the LORD of hosts. ‘And now entreat the favour of God, that he may be gracious to us. With such a gift from your hand, will he show favour to any of you?’ says the LORD of hosts. ‘Oh that there were one among you who would shut the doors, that you might not kindle fire on my altar in vain! I have no pleasure in you’, says the LORD of hosts, ‘and I will not accept an offering from your hand... You profane it when you say that the Lord’s table is polluted, and its fruit, that is, its food may be despised. But you say: “What a weariness this is”, and you snort at it’, says the LORD of hosts. ‘You bring what has been taken by violence or is lame or sick, and this you bring as your offering! Shall I accept that from your hand?’ says the LORD (Mal. 1:6-13).

Do not miss the arrogance of the people: ‘How... How... What a weariness... You snort...’.

As for the priests, God let them know what was in store for them unless things improved:

I will send the curse upon you and I will curse your blessings. Indeed, I have already cursed them, because you do not lay it to heart. Behold, I will rebuke your offspring, and spread dung on your faces, the dung of your offerings, and you shall be taken away with it... The lips of a priest should guard knowledge, and people should seek instruction from his

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mouth, for he is the messenger of the LORD of hosts. But you have turned aside from the way. You have caused many to stumble by your instruction. You have corrupted the covenant of Levi, says the LORD of hosts, and so I make you despised and abased before all the people, inasmuch as you do not keep my ways but show partiality in your instruction (Mal. 2:2-9).

And so on...

But – how amazing it is – in the midst of this catastrophic declension, God had still preserved a remnant among them:

Those who feared the LORD spoke with one another. The LORD paid attention and heard them, and a book of remembrance was written before him of those who feared the LORD and esteemed his name. ‘They shall be mine’, says the LORD of hosts, ‘in the day when I make up my treasured possession, and I will spare them as a man spares his son who serves him. Then once more you shall see the distinction between the righteous and the wicked, between one who serves God and one who does not serve him’ (Mal. 3:16-18).

But it was only a remnant:

In that day the remnant of Israel and the survivors of the house of Jacob will no more lean on him who struck them, but will lean on the LORD, the Holy One of Israel, in truth. A remnant will return, the remnant of Jacob, to the mighty God. For though your people Israel be as the sand of the sea, only a remnant of them will return (Isa. 10:20-22).

Isaiah cries out concerning Israel: ‘Though the number of the sons of Israel be as the sand of the sea, only a remnant of them will be saved, for the Lord will carry out his sentence upon the earth fully and without delay’. And as Isaiah predicted: ‘If the Lord of hosts had not left us offspring, we would have been like Sodom and become like Gomorrah’...

Israel [as a whole] failed to obtain what it was seeking. The elect obtained it, but the rest were hardened... I do not want you to be unaware of this mystery, brothers: a partial hardening has come upon Israel (Rom. 9:27-29; 11:7,25).

After Malachi, the Jews had to endure 400 years of silence from God. And when Messiah appeared among them, in the main they rejected him (John 1:10-11), even crucifying him!

John, when referring to Christ's raising of Lazarus, recorded Jewish intrigue, even at the highest level, so that in their hatred they could scheme how to get the Romans to do the dirty work and kill Christ for them (Acts 2:23):

Some of them [that is, the Jews] went to the Pharisees and told them what Jesus had done. So the chief priests and the Pharisees gathered the council and said: 'What are we to do? For this man performs many signs. If we let him go on like this, everyone will believe in him, and the Romans will come and take away both our place and our nation'. But one of them, Caiaphas, who was high priest that year, said to them: 'You know nothing at all. Nor do you understand that it is better for you that one man should die for the people, not that the whole nation should perish'. He did not say this of his own accord, but being high priest that year he prophesied that Jesus would die for the nation, and not for the nation only, but also to gather into one the children of God who are scattered abroad. So from that day on they made plans to put him [that is, Jesus] to death (John 11:46-53).

Christ let the Jews know that he was not ignorant of what was going on. By means of parable,⁴ he confronted them with their hatred of him, and their plans to see it put into action:

There was a master of a house who planted a vineyard and put a fence around it and dug a winepress in it and built a tower and leased it to tenants, and went into another country. When the season for fruit drew near, he sent his servants to the tenants to get his fruit. And the tenants took his servants and beat one, killed another, and stoned another. Again he sent other servants, more than the first. And they did the same to them. Finally he sent his son to them, saying: 'They will respect my son'. But when the tenants saw the son, they said to themselves: 'This is the heir. Come, let us kill him and have his inheritance'. And they took him and threw him out of the vineyard and killed him. When therefore the owner of the vineyard comes, what will he do to those tenants? (Matt. 21:33-40).

⁴ No nice story for children!

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As he went on to tell them, Scripture – the word of God to Israel – had predicted it:

Have you never read in the Scriptures: ‘The stone that the builders rejected has become the cornerstone; this was the Lord’s doing, and it is marvellous in our eyes’? (Matt. 21:42).

As Peter, in his turn told the Jews:

This Jesus is the stone that was rejected by you, the builders, which has become the cornerstone (Acts 4:11).

As Israel had begun, so Israel went on. At the start of his letter, Jude summed it up:

Now I want to remind you, although you once fully knew it, that the Lord,⁵ who saved a people out of the land of Egypt, afterward destroyed those who did not believe (Jude 5).

And Christ, addressing his disciples who expressed their wonder at the buildings of the temple, was blunt about the future of the pinnacle of Judaism:

You see all these, [that is, the buildings of the temple] do you not? Truly, I say to you, there will not be left here one stone upon another that will not be thrown down (Matt. 24:2).

Such is a very brief outline of Israel’s track record. One word summarises it: disaster!

Take one example of a new-covenant writer making telling use of Israel’s history; that is, Israel’s history of failure under its covenant:

As the Holy Spirit says [to us today, that is]: ‘Today, if you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts as in the rebellion [of the people of Israel], on the day of testing in the wilderness, where your fathers put me to the test and saw my works for forty years. Therefore I was provoked with that generation, and said: “They always go astray in their heart; they have not known my ways”. As I swore in my wrath: “They shall not enter my rest”’.

⁵ Probably better ‘Jesus’, meaning ‘the Lord’.

That's the history of Israel. Now the application – to believers in the first century, and to believers now:

Take care, brothers, lest there be in any of you an evil, unbelieving heart, leading you to fall away from the living God. But exhort one another every day, as long as it is called 'today', that none of you may be hardened by the deceitfulness of sin. For we have come to share in Christ, if indeed we hold our original confidence firm to the end. As it is said: 'Today, if you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts as in the rebellion'.

Therefore, while the promise of entering his rest still stands, let us fear lest any of you should seem to have failed to reach it. For good news came to us just as to them, but the message they heard did not benefit them, because they were not united by faith with those who listened. For we who have believed enter that rest, as he has said: 'As I swore in my wrath: "They shall not enter my rest"', although his works were finished from the foundation of the world. For he has somewhere spoken of the seventh day in this way: 'And God rested on the seventh day from all his works'. And again in this passage he said: 'They shall not enter my rest'.

Since therefore it remains for some to enter it, and those who formerly received the good news failed to enter because of disobedience, again he appoints a certain day, 'Today', saying through David so long afterward, in the words already quoted: 'Today, if you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts'. For if Joshua had given them rest, God would not have spoken of another day later on. So then, there remains a sabbath rest for the people of God, for whoever has entered God's rest has also rested from his works as God did from his.

Let us therefore strive to enter that rest, so that no one may fall by the same sort of disobedience. For the word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing to the division of soul and of spirit, of joints and of marrow, and discerning the thoughts and intentions of the heart. And no creature is hidden from his sight, but all are naked and exposed to the eyes of him to whom we must give account (Heb. 3:7 – 4:13).

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This leaves us with the question, the decision. In light of the above, what is your verdict? Would you say that Israel's history was one of Triumph or Tragedy? Of course, it wasn't either/or, black or white. Nevertheless which of the two would best fit the bill? And what bearing does this have on what we might expect in 'these last days'? I ask this, even though the new covenant is the age of the Spirit, and every believer is indwelt by the Spirit. Despite these signal changes and unspeakable advantages, as we have seen, the New Testament is explicit that Israel's history serves as a warning to us in the days of the new covenant. At the very least, we have to say that it is all too easy for believers to fail under their covenant, and do so just as easily as Israel failed in the days of their covenant. To accommodate the words of Joseph Hart: 'Brethren let us be not too secure'.⁶

⁶ Joseph Hart's hymn: 'Let us ask the important question'.