

were forbidden. Why? First, because the spirits were not the helpful informants they pretended to be. They were really servants of the Snake, luring those lusting for wealth, sex, power, knowledge, or sensation into deception, bondage, and death. The price for their information was too high, and Yahweh knew it. And second, any knowledge, prosperity, or power that Israel needed, Yahweh was happy to provide. To seek those things elsewhere was to say to their Dad, "We don't need You, we don't want You, we don't trust You, we don't love You." It was to repeat Adam and Eve's insult, attempting to take by force what Yahweh would give by grace.

Israel would not need channelers because she would have Yahweh's written word and His living spokespersons, His prophets. These men and women were called by Yahweh and gifted to see the truth in events and the mind of God because of their intimate relationship with Him. If Israel needed to know the future, Yahweh would tell the prophets and they would tell the people. If Israel needed to know God's will these spokespersons would tell them that, too. (Moses wrote down everything Yahweh told him, the priests interpreted those writings, and the prophets spoke God's current will to each generation.) Israel could tell a true prophet from a false one because a true one would speak nothing that contradicted what Yahweh had already told Moses or what actually happened in the world.

With a Holy God in their midst, holiness touched every aspect of these people's lives. But with the advantages of having a God next door went the drawbacks of having even the textile composition of one's clothes turned into an object lesson. The book of Leviticus (the holiness manual of the tribe of Levi) underscores the message with these refrains:

Be holy because I, [Yahweh] your God, am holy. . . . I am [Yahweh] your God.

NOTE

1. Concepts of the triple goddess overlapped in the Middle East, so exact beliefs about each goddess varied from city to city.

8

March to the Promised Land

Numbers, Deuteronomy

Yahweh Musters His Army

Yahweh gave most of this legislation while Israel remained camped at the base of Mount Sinai. For eleven months Sinai was a tent city, as populous as many ancient capitals, while craftsmen constructed Yahweh's tabernacle, the priests learned their duties, and Moses wrote down the King's instructions.

At the end of that time, Yahweh ordered Moses to take a military census of all men over twenty years old. The 600,000 troops were organized in divisions according to their clans and tribes. The tribe of Levi was set aside to assist the priests in caring for the tabernacle and its furnishings (mending, cleaning, polishing) and cleaning up the unimaginable mess of slaughtering and burning several large animals each day.¹ The tribe of Joseph was divided in two according to his sons, Ephraim and Manasseh, to bring the total tribal military divisions back to twelve.

Yahweh dictated the order in which the tribes would trek through the desert and how they would camp. On a march, the Levites led carrying the ark, God's throne. In camp, the tribes were arranged in a square surrounding the tabernacle in the center. In this manner Israel would march to Canaan like the

conquering army of God that she was. The rabble sorely needed such discipline; they were on display before all the nations.

After almost a year at Sinai, the Israelites set out to finish the journey to Canaan. They began in high spirits, singing as they tramped, but as before they soon grew bored. It was the same old complaining: manna is dull, water is scarce, walking is tedious, wouldn't it be nice to be eating lamb and garlic in Egypt? So Yahweh sent quail again, but He also sent fire and plague to snap the mob into line. It seemed that nothing but strong discipline made a dent in these people's hard hearts.

Cowardice

Despite all the grumbling, Moses managed to lead his ragtag outfit several more hundred miles to somewhere just south of Canaan. There he appointed a man from each tribe to a reconnaissance team. It would scout the land and bring back a thorough report: population, fortifications, soil quality, land features, agricultural produce. The people needed some encouragement to begin their conquest, and also some military intelligence.

When the spies returned forty days later, they brought a glowing report of the land and a depressing assessment of the foe. Two of the scouts—Joshua and Caleb—were hot to move into this rich land, but the other ten were scared. While Joshua and Caleb saw what Yahweh could do, the others focused on what they could not do.

Cowardice prevailed. The people swore at Moses for leading them into this mess and debated stoning him, choosing a new leader, and trying to go back to Egypt. Better to be live slaves than dead soldiers. Moses begged them to reconsider, but the complaints grew louder until suddenly the cloud of glory blazed out from the tabernacle. Yahweh thundered:

“How long will these people treat me with contempt? How long will they refuse to believe in me, in spite of all the miraculous signs I have performed among them? I will strike them down with a plague and destroy them, but I will make you into a nation greater and stronger than they.” (Numbers 14:11-12)

Moses had to intercede again. He based his plea on two facts: Yahweh's character (“slow to anger, abounding in love, forgiving sin and rebellion”) and His plan to demonstrate that character to the nations by liberating and caring for Israel (“If You put these people to death all at one time, the nations . . . will say, ‘Yahweh was not able to bring these people into the land He promised them on oath’”).

Yahweh was pleased. He always responded when people showed they were betting their lives that Yahweh's word and character could be counted on. So instead of wiping out the whole people, He decreed that the generation of faithless cowards would die in the wilderness, and that forty years hence, when a new generation had grown up, He would lead them into the Promised Land. Only Joshua and Caleb would survive to see Canaan, because they trusted Yahweh.

The Israelites mourned bitterly when Moses conveyed this to them. The glowing cloud terrified them, and they decided they would rather die quickly invading Canaan than spend the rest of their lives wandering through this desert. So they determined to attack the Canaanites after all.

Moses begged them not to try it without Yahweh's help. But they ignored him, and the Canaanites trounced them soundly. Sadly the survivors returned to the camp, and the cavalcade set off for the deep desert.

Wandering

It must have been miserable trudging aimlessly through the desert for forty years. Children were born and raised on manna. The flocks were used for sacrifice, so the people may have tasted the meat of fellowship offerings and perhaps some milk, but there were no spices, no vegetables, no bread. Manna kept one healthy, but it was insipid. It was a major feat to keep idle men from brawling.

When revolt brewed, Moses never bothered to defend his authority. He always knew it was really Yahweh who was being rejected, so he left it to Yahweh to defend His own honor. Two hundred fifty upstart Levites were consumed by fire in one rebellion, 14,700 people died in another.

In all, Moses was a wise and humble leader. Yahweh loved him dearly. But with great honor and gifting went great responsibility. Moses, above everyone else, had to treat Yahweh's commands with respect. One day another of the perennial quarrels over water shortage was simmering. As usual, the people shouted abuse while Moses and Aaron fell on their faces before Yahweh, who told Moses to speak to a certain rock and water would gush out. But Moses lost his temper and shouted to the gathered community, "Listen, you rebels, must we bring you water out of this rock?" Then he struck the rock twice with his staff. Water gushed out, but Yahweh was mad. Moses had publicly dishonored Him by disobeying His order and acting rashly, as though his action, not Yahweh's word, were providing the water. The cost was severe: both Moses and Aaron (who had supported the offense) would die before they reached Canaan.

Three Attacks

As the time of wandering drew to an end, Moses began to lead the people toward Canaan. (See map, page 342.) The Edomites denied passage through their land, so Moses circled around and approached from the east, through Moab. The Moabites let Israel pass through peacefully, but then the Amorites and, after them, the people of Bashan blocked the way. Yahweh enabled Israel to defeat both of these groups and take their land. It was fertile, well-watered real estate, especially good for livestock, so two and a half of the tribes (the tribe of Mannaseh split) asked Moses if they could claim this as their promised land. Moses agreed on the condition that while the women and children could settle there, the fighting men must help the rest of Israel take their territory.

After securing these northern areas, Moses led the people south again to the plains of Moab, just east of the Jordan River. Right across the river was the Canaanite fortress of Jericho, strategically situated as the doorway to Canaan and the first target of the Israelite assault.

But Balak, king of Moab, did not believe Israel intended to use his land only as a staging area for an attack westward. He had heard of the easy victories over Bashan and the Amorites,

and feared Moab was next. Convinced that he could not defeat Israel by force of arms, he resorted to sorcery. He summoned a certain Mesopotamian prophet-for-hire named Balaam to put a curse on Israel.

Balaam did his best. But every time he tried to accommodate his client, Yahweh threatened to kill him, so Balaam kept pronouncing blessing over Israel.

Balaam was essentially a sorcerer. As such, he ultimately served Satan. The biblical account does not name him, but it was the Snake who stood behind both attacks on Israel: the military and the occult. Both had failed, yet the Serpent had one more strategy. At his prompting, Balaam suggested to Balak that Israel might be neutralized if some local women could seduce the Israelite men into pagan orgies. This ploy met with splendid success: Yahweh had to kill 24,000 of His men with a plague before the Israelites turned away from the allure of paganism.

It was an omen of things to come. What force and sorcery could not do, seduction and the Israelites' own senseless moral choices could, and did. Yahweh could protect them from external attack, but His whole plan depended on humans making free choices either for or against Him. In this intent, so foreign to Satan's notions of domination and subjugation, the Viper thought he saw Yahweh's defeat. But Yahweh's plan had a facet so incredible, so unspeakable, that Satan never for an instant foresaw it or could scheme against it.

Moses' Farewell

As it happened, despite all the rebellions and debacles, 600,000 men of fighting age survived to enter Canaan when Yahweh finally declared that the moment had come. On the plains of Moab overlooking the Promised Land, Moses gathered the people to hear his final words. During the desert sojourn he had recorded for them their history (Genesis, Exodus, Numbers) and the royal law by which they were to live (Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers). Now he delivered three long speeches that together formed an impassioned exposition of Yahweh's covenant. He even used the traditional treaty format. After all, only Moses, Joshua, and Caleb, and a few people who had been children forty years earlier,

survived of all those who had seen the plagues of Egypt and the miracle at the Reed Sea. Most of this generation had been born in the desert.

The book of Deuteronomy records Moses' three sermons. He recounted Israel's failures and Yahweh's faithfulness. He reiterated the basic stipulations of the covenant and preached on the meanings of many specific laws of economics, social justice, and worship. He set before the people a choice: life and blessing if they obeyed their King; death and cursing if they rebelled.

Observe [these laws] carefully, for this will show your wisdom and understanding to the nations, who will hear about all these decrees and say, "Surely this great nation is a wise and understanding people." What other nation is so great as to have their gods near them the way [Yahweh] our God is near us whenever we pray to him? And what other nation is so great as to have such righteous decrees and laws as this body of laws I am setting before you today? (4:6-8)

Hear, O Israel: [Yahweh] our God, [Yahweh] is one. Love [Yahweh] your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength. (6:4-5)

He humbled you, causing you to hunger and then feeding you with manna, which neither you nor your fathers had known, to teach you that man does not live on bread alone but on every word that comes from the mouth of [Yahweh]. (8:3)

This day I call heaven and earth as witnesses against you that I have set before you life and death, blessings and curses. Now choose life, so that you and your children may live and that you may love [Yahweh] your God, listen to his voice, and hold fast to him. For [Yahweh] is your life, and he will give you many years in the land he swore to give to your fathers, Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. (30:19-20)

"Who is like you, O Israel, a people saved by [Yahweh]?" Moses concluded. Then he climbed nearby Mount Nebo and looked across the Jordan at the rich land Yahweh was giving them. He wished that after all this he could have crossed that river, but to see the land was enough. Now he was going home.

Yahweh buried him, and the nation mourned him for thirty days. But Moses had laid his hands on Joshua before his death, and the Spirit of God that had given Moses his wisdom to lead the people had fallen upon Moses' aide. Moses had been Israel's shepherd, now Joshua would be her general. And Joshua turned his face toward Jericho.

NOTE

1. God's dealings with Levi is a good example of His mercy. Both Simeon and Levi had been sentenced to be dispersed among the other tribes because of their forefathers' crime of massacring Shechem. But God turned Levi's punishment to blessing because it was the only tribe that resisted the idolatry at Sinai. Yahweh's justice was drastic and irrevocable, but He could transmute it to mercy in the most amazing ways.