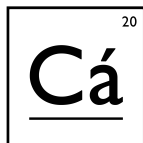


# SEARCH THE SCRIPTURES



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# SEARCH THE SCRIPTURES

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**Genesis - Exodus**

by  
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# Table of Contents

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## **GOD'S WORD**

1. By Scripture Alone	7
2. The Authority of the Bible	9
3. Biblical Manuscripts	13
4. Canonical and Apocryphal Writings	18
5. Biblical Criticism	25
6. Contradictions in the Bible?	32
7. The Unity of the Bible	39
8. Reading the Bible	46

## **GENESIS**

1. The Book of the “Generations”	53
2. In the Beginning	55
3. The Toledoth of Heaven and Earth	58
4. The Toledoth of Adam (5—6:8)	64
5. The Toledoth of Noah (6:9—9:29)	66
6. The Toledoth of the Sons of Noah (10—11:9)	70

7. The Toledoth of Shem (11:10-26)	71
8. The Toledoth of Terah (11:27—25:11)	72
9. The Toledoth of Ishmael (25:12-18)	83
10. The Toledoth of Isaac (25:19—35:29)	84
11. The Toledoth of Esau (36—37:1)	92
12. The Toledoth of Jacob (37:2—50:26)	94

## **EXODUS**

1. The Book of Israel's First Deliverance	103
2. The Struggle Begins	106
3. Deliverance through Divine Judgment	111
4. Across the Red Sea and the Wilderness	115
5. Israel at Sinai	121
6. The Book of the Covenant	126
7. The Covenant Ceremony	129
8. The Tabernacle	131
9. The Covenant Broken and Renewed	138

<b>INDEX</b>	145
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# God's Word

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## 1. By Scripture Alone

*The Book of books.* In Article 7 of the Belgic Confession (1561), we read: “We believe that these Holy Scriptures fully contain the will of God and teach sufficiently all that man must believe if he is to be saved.” This confession also declares that “The whole manner of worship which God requires of us is written in them at large.”

If this is also our confession, we must live by Scripture alone. The Bible is all we need. But why? Christianity is not the only religion based on sacred writings. Why do we accept the Bible and reject the Koran, the Edda, and the holy books of India? Why do we push aside all those other books, which certainly contain a great deal of wisdom, and focus our attention on that one “book of books”?

I have no other answer to offer than this: the Bible itself claims to be the sole revelation of God. And faith accepts this claim. Faith’s acceptance is based on the Bible’s testimony about itself.

The Scriptures claim to reveal the will of God to us; they are a lamp shedding light on our path. Woe to the man

who adds anything to the Scriptures or takes anything away from them. We live by Scripture alone. *Sola Scriptura!*

*The Reformation.* The sixteenth-century struggle between Rome and the Reformation revolved around this very point. Is the Bible to be regarded as the sole authority, or is there some other authority in addition? Can tradition or the church fathers or church councils or papal decrees be accepted as authoritative alongside the Scriptures?

The Roman Catholic Church did in fact put Scripture on a par with tradition. Indeed, Rome accepted the Bible *because* it was accepted by the church. Thus the authority of the Scriptures was made dependent on tradition and the authority of the *church*.

Yet the Reformation clung firmly to Scripture alone, confessing that the Bible is completely authoritative, sufficient in itself, clear, and indispensable. When people within “Protestant” circles began to question this doctrine and chip away at it, the Reformers stubbornly held their ground.

The Anabaptists, for example, elevated the “inner light” above the “dead letter” of Scripture. Anyone who received special, direct revelations from God was a prophet, someone to be listened to. The “Spirit” gives life, it was argued, while the “letter” of the Bible kills.

The Reformers saw clearly that this way of thinking represents false teaching. Therefore they rejected it wherever they encountered it. The Canons of Dordt (formulated by a Dutch Reformed synod of 1618-19) declared that the assurance enjoyed by God’s elect that they will persevere in their faith “is not produced by any peculiar revelation contrary to or independent of the Word of God, but springs from faith in God’s promises, which He has most abundantly revealed in His Word for our comfort” (V, 10).



We live by the Bible alone. It is there that we are instructed in “the whole manner of worship which God requires of us.” Is that also your confession? Do you accept the Scriptures as God’s infallible Word? Has the Bible proven itself to you? Do you hear the Creator and Redeemer speaking to you in the Bible?

## 2. The Authority of the Bible

*The real author.* Scripture is inspired by God Himself (II Tim. 3:16). It comes to us not at man’s instigation or initiative but because men were moved by the Holy Spirit to speak “from God” (II Pet. 1:21).

This does not mean that we must regard the writers of the Bible as robots or scribes taking dictation. No, God uses *living* human beings in His service. He even allows them a major role in giving shape to the Word He speaks to mankind. The individuality of the Bible’s human authors comes through clearly, even though God Himself is the real author of Scripture.

To recognize the role of certain human beings in writing the books that make up our Bible is not to say that there are errors and contradictions in the Bible. We are not to declare that God’s Word is *in* the Bible—in and among all those words written by human beings. The Bible *is* God’s authoritative Word—that’s our point of departure.

*Authoritative.* Because we have received the Bible from the hand of the King of kings, we must accept it as authoritative. We must bow unconditionally to the Voice that speaks to us in the Bible. We may not argue that we live in a different time and a different society—as though this has something to do with our attitude toward the Bible. And we may not declare that the authoritative

language of the Bible was binding only as long as Christ's apostles walked the earth.

The Bible's authority is not time-bound. Scripture is God's Word for a thousand generations. Even though the people of our time feel uneasy whenever the word *authority* is used, we must subject ourselves willingly to the authority of God's Word.

*Complete.* The confession "By Scripture alone" means that the Bible is no longer open to correction through later revelations. There is no continuing Scriptural revelation in our dispensation. The Lord has already revealed *all* that we need to know. The Bible is complete.

We must not try to "go beyond what is written" (I Cor. 4:6). To "go beyond" would be to depart from the teaching of the Christ (II John, vs. 9). We need not await a "fifth gospel." What we have already been told about Christ is all we need in order to know God and serve Him effectively. No eye has seen, no ear has heard, no mind has conceived what God has prepared for those who love him (I Cor. 2:9; Is. 64:4).

*The Spirit of truth.* Today there are many Christians (especially in liberal circles) who do believe in continuing revelation. The Bible is not the only "scripture" they venerate; they find traces of divine inspiration in other documents and writing as well.

Such views clearly violate Scripture's own intent. God's Word leaves no room for any other "word" of comparable authority.

There are certain other Christians who make a point of declaring that they accept the Bible's authority wholeheartedly—but they still wind up undermining it. They like to point to John 16:13, where Christ tells His apostles: "When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all the truth." On the basis of this text they await a new

historical period—a period of the Spirit, which will open with a second Pentecost. (Think of the revival movements in the nineteenth century and the charismatic movement in our own time.)

Such expectations are based on the mistaken assumption that the canon is still *open*. New revelations through the Spirit are possible, they argue.

Proponents of this outlook misread John 16:13, which provides no ground for such expectations. In the apostolic period between the years A.D. 30 (Pentecost) and 70 (the destruction of Jerusalem), the Christ *fulfilled* His promise to His apostles. The Spirit came and served as their guide in unlocking “the truth.” The abiding result of this process is the New Testament!

When John talks about “the truth,” he means the actualization of the shadows and models of the Old Testament. The Spirit made it clear to the apostles and their fellow workers that Jesus is indeed the Messiah of whom the Old Testament prophesied.

We must not make the mistake of seeking to remake redemptive history, nor should we try to turn its clock back so that we can relive the period immediately after Christ’s resurrection. The Spirit has *already* guided us into *all* of the truth. We are not apostles who have been promised a special, secret message from the Lord, and therefore we *may not* hope for a new, further revelation.

We have Moses and the prophets—and the New Testament Scriptures in addition. We enjoy the privilege of reading and rereading the Old Testament in the light of the New. We have the cross and the sign of Jonah—and that ought to be enough for us. We have seen the fulfillment, the “realization,” of “the truth.” That “truth” is Christ, who spoke of Himself as “the Way, the Truth, and the Light.”

Don’t forget Paul’s warning: we are not to go beyond what is written (I Cor. 4:6). The canon is *not open*

anymore! We are rich in possessing the Word of God, and it would be sinful to long for more. That Word, after all, is the sword of the Spirit (Eph. 6:17). One sword should be enough for us.

*Interpreting Scripture.* The best way to interpret Scripture is to let it shed light on itself. In other words, the best guide to the Bible is the Bible itself. We must learn to look for what the text is actually saying. How? By taking the time to study the context, by not deciding in advance what the text means, and by looking for themes and expressions on which we may find light elsewhere in the Bible.

This humble approach to Scripture is difficult for sinful human beings. Whenever we encounter something in the Bible that strikes at our persistent human pride, our first impulse is to tone it down or explain it away. In fact, we're experts at interpreting the Bible in ways that cause us no discomfort.

Sometimes we even try to make the Bible say more than it really says: we look for a "truth behind the truth." How? One way is by using allegorical methods of interpretation.

Over the centuries such methods have often been applied. Certain passages, it was argued, cannot be taken literally; a "spiritual" interpretation is needed. This opened up endless possibilities. Even Luther, before the profound change in his thinking, was drawn in: the four legs of the good Samaritan's donkey stood for the four "gospels."

The effort to find a symbolic meaning for the facts of redemptive history continues in our time. Mysticism, spiritualism and horizontalism are applied in ingenious ways that lead to a perversion of the Bible's meaning.

The Bible is not a book of puzzles and riddles; it is the clear and concrete Word of God. Anyone can comprehend its message. The Bible itself strongly opposes any manipulation of its words.

*Clear or murky?* Don't let anyone tell you that the Bible is a murky, dark, or mysterious book. Scripture calls itself a light, a lamp (II Pet. 1:19; Ps. 119:105).

This is not to say that there are no difficult texts in the Bible. There are. But the Bible's message for us is fully understandable. It is not a mystery that can be comprehended only by members of a certain closed circle. Scripture presents us with the "revelation of a mystery" (Rom. 16:25-6; Col. 1:26). "I did not speak in secret, in a land of darkness" (Is. 45:19; see also John 18:20).

If you read the Scriptures carefully and pray for the guidance of the Spirit, you will receive insight. The Lord will repay your efforts as you study His Word. Just try it, and you'll see for yourself.

Even if some passage leaves you scratching your head the first time you read it, remember that the Old Testament and New Testament shed light on each other. The meaning of such a text will soon become clear if we make use of the light provided for us. An individual text must be read in the context of the entire chapter—and ultimately against the background of an entire Bible book and of Scripture as a whole.

When we study the Bible, we go "from strength to strength" and become "well versed in the scriptures" (Acts 18:24). Isn't that a goal worth striving for?

### **3. Biblical Manuscripts**

*Hebrew and Greek.* Because the Scriptures originated as a series of documents pertaining to a covenant made at a certain point in history, they were written in the language used by the people who lived in covenant with God. The Old Testament was written in Hebrew (except for some parts of Ezra and Daniel which were written in Aramaic).

The New Testament was written in the language universally understood at that time in the Roman empire, i.e. Greek.

Of course we do not possess the original manuscripts. The Bible has come down to us in individual copies made by hand. Until fairly recently, the oldest Old Testament manuscripts dated back to about A.D. 1000.

*The Dead Sea Scrolls.* Since the year 1947, Old Testament books and fragments dating all the way back to the first century after Christ—and perhaps even earlier—have been found in caves in the neighborhood of the Dead Sea. These manuscripts were placed there by a sect known as the Essenes, who had established some sort of monastery at Qumran. When the Jews rebelled against the Roman empire in A.D. 67, the Qumran community did not escape punishment. In a book on the Dead Sea Scrolls we read:

It appears that when the enemy approached, the members of this brotherhood tried to safeguard their most valued possessions, namely, their holy books, which had been recopied so diligently and were read both aloud and silently for devotions. In Qumran and the surrounding area, hundreds of scrolls were found, most of them made of leather or parchment, but some of cheaper, less durable papyrus. They included texts of the various books of the Bible, especially Deuteronomy, Isaiah and Psalms . . . . These Biblical scrolls, together with some other scrolls, were protected by linen wrappers and placed in bunches of four or five in large pots, each of which was covered with a lid. . . . Once all the manuscripts were packed, they were brought to caves in the vicinity so that the costly treasures could be hidden in the most inaccessible places possible. After the Roman soldiers had captured the monastery building and burned it, they went on to search some of the nearby caves. The holy books found in those caves were ripped to pieces.

The manuscripts that did not fall into the hand of the vengeful Romans were then found many centuries later.\*

Thanks to the searches of the Bedouins and various scholars, most of the manuscripts that survived have now come to light.

*Textual criticism.* The important thing about the Dead Sea Scrolls is that the text of these ancient Biblical manuscripts differs very little from the text we already had from scrolls that had been made later in history. Thus it appears that the Jewish scholars during and after the exile copied and recopied the Bible in an amazingly exact way.

Of course there was always a certain amount of room for disagreement on how a certain passage was to be read. Furthermore, a word would occasionally be skipped or misspelled. Because Hebrew originally did not record the vowel sounds that go with the consonant letters, there could well be legitimate disagreement over the meaning of a word. If we take the consonants r-t, for example, inserting different vowel sounds makes a world of difference as to the meaning of the word: it could be rat, rate, rite, rot, rote, or rut.

It is the task of the textual critic to examine the differences between various manuscripts in order to reconstruct the pure text as accurately as possible. Yet, the differences in readings have not significantly affected the text handed down to us.

The discovery of these manuscripts in the Judean wilderness near the Dead Sea shows that the Lord saw to it that the Old Testament was preserved very carefully as the centuries went by. What believers of all ages have always been sure of has been demonstrated once more by the

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\*J. van der Ploeg, *Vondsten in de Woestijn van Juda: De Rollen der Dode Zee* (Utrecht and Antwerp, 1957), p. 78.

discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls, namely, that the Word of God has not been subjected to falsification.

*Ancient manuscripts.* This applies to the New Testament just as much as the Old. Thanks to the diligence of the monks in the monasteries, the text of the New Testament has also been handed on to us faithfully. If you compare the King James translation with a twentieth century translation, you can easily see that the more recent version is based on a somewhat different reading of the original text—but the differences are slight.

Many older manuscripts have been discovered since the time when the King James translation was made. Excavators in Egypt, for example, have unearthed a number of papyrus fragments on which passages of Scripture are written.

Seventeenth century translations were based on a Greek text dating back to about the year 600. Today we have much older texts available. Tischendorf, who made expeditions in 1844, 1853 and 1859 to a Russian Orthodox monastery near Mount Sinai, managed to find a manuscript (now called the *Codex Sinaiticus*) which was probably made in the fourth century. Some scholars even suspect that Constantine himself had this codex prepared in 331 for use in the churches. In any event, one can well understand that the British Museum in London is proud to possess this manuscript, which it purchased from the Soviet government in 1934 for 100,000 British pounds. In addition to this codex, others of that time have been found, e.g. the *Alexandrinus* and the *Vaticanus*.

In the monasteries of the Near East, there are still many treasures to be found. An American expedition to 25 countries in the Near East came back with an enormous store of manuscripts on microfilm, including Arabic, Armenian, Coptic, Gothic, Latin, and Persian translations of parts of the Bible, as well as liturgies and writings of the church



fathers in which the New Testament is quoted. By comparing all these materials, scholars hope to get closer to the text of the New Testament.

The discovery of papyrus manuscripts has also contributed a great deal to the reconstruction of the original New Testament text. A fragment of the Gospel according to John dating from the year 200 has come to light. There is even a fragment of John 18 going all the way back to the year 120. Almost half of the New Testament text has already been discovered in papyrus form (3,380 verses out of 7,957).

*Discrepancies.* Once more I must emphasize that the differences between the various ancient manuscripts that have been discovered do not affect the substance of the New Testament books. The discrepancies involve such matters as the divisions in the text and the arrangement of the words into units of meaning.

Such discrepancies should not surprise us in view of the fact that the older Greek manuscripts were written in capital letters alone and without spaces between the words. Thus the first sentence of the Gospel according to John would look something like this: INTHEBEGINNINGWASTHEWORD. I'm sure you can understand that when the words were separated—as they are in modern editions of the Greek New Testament—there were some problems and disagreements between scholars. Consider the phrase THESEARCHES. Is it to be read as THE SEARCHES or THESE ARCHES?

It was inevitable, then, that copyists would occasionally make mistakes because of the different readings possible. Sometimes failing eyesight led to the omission of a word or two. When the text of Luke was recopied, for example, the copyist might make the mistake of inserting one of Matthew's familiar formulations.

Recopying books word for word is far from easy. It

definitely requires the patience of a monk. Therefore Biblical scholars must continue the quest for older manuscripts.

Yet, this does not detract from the reliability and trustworthiness of the Scriptures as divine revelation. Contrary to all sorts of predictions made by scholars, recent discoveries have *confirmed* the veracity of God's Word. Even without the results of all those archeological investigations—which we accept gratefully, of course—the Bible is a lamp illuminating our path. “The unfolding of thy words gives light” (Ps. 119:130).

#### **4. Canonical and Apocryphal Writings**

*The Hebrew Bible.* Another question we must face is how the writings that make up the Bible came to be accepted as authoritative. Why are certain books excluded from the Bible, e.g. the set of books known as the “Apocrypha”? How did the church arrive at the canon, i.e. the list of books accepted as inspired and authoritative?

The Hebrews had a Bible (the Old Testament), but it differed from our Old Testament in some respects. First came the five books of Moses, which they call “the Law,” “the Torah.” The next set of books was known as “the Former Prophets”—Joshua, Judges, Samuel, and Kings. Then came “the Latter Prophets”—Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and the twelve minor prophets. The two groups of prophetic books were together referred to as “the Prophets,” to distinguish them from “the Law” (see Luke 16:29; Acts 24:14).

Finally, the Jewish Bible had a third section, known as “the Writings” (see Luke 24:27, 44). Under this heading we find certain “festal scrolls,” i.e. books intended for reading on religious holidays—the Song of Songs

(Passover or the Feast of Unleavened Bread), Ruth (the Feast of Pentecost or Feast of Weeks), Lamentations (the anniversary of the destruction of Jerusalem), Ecclesiastes (the Feast of Tabernacles), and Esther (the Feast of Purim). “The Writings” also included Job, Psalms, Proverbs, Daniel, Ezra, Nehemiah, and Chronicles.

*The Septuagint.* In response to the needs of Jews who had emigrated to areas where Greek was spoken (especially the city of Alexandria), the Old Testament was translated into Greek. Just how this project got underway and was brought to completion is not clear.

A legend has it that 70 scholars (or 72, six from each of the twelve tribes) were sent by the high priest in Jerusalem to Alexandria at the request of King Ptolemy Philadelphus (285-247 B.C.). They are supposed to have translated the five books of Moses in 72 days on the island of Pharos.

Whatever the truth may be, a Greek translation of the Old Testament did come into being. This translation was called the *Septuagint* (LXX), after the 70 (or 72) scholars. (The name comes from the same root as our word *septagenarian*.) Scholars today believe that the Septuagint was completed by 130 B.C.

*The Apocrypha.* The Septuagint arranges the books of the Old Testament in the same order in which we find them in our Bible. Yet it includes *more* books in the Old Testament than the Hebrew Bible does. The rabbis spoke of the additional books as “hidden” or “secret” (apocryphal) books. They were not preserved in the same boxes as the books of the Torah and were not regarded as normative.

The Roman Catholic Church followed the lead of the Septuagint translators by including many of the additional books in its Bible. The King James Bible in turn con-

formed to this custom by including these books as well. Yet early Protestant Bibles containing the Apocryphal books did point out that these books were not accepted as part of the canon. In Luther's translation of 1534, they are given the following heading: "Apocrypha, that is, books that are not held equal to the sacred Scriptures but nevertheless are good and useful to read." The apocryphal books could be used as "edifying" reading material, then, but they were not to be used as a basis for the teachings of the church.

*Apocryphal stories.* Many of the stories in the Apocrypha are not in harmony with the Scriptures and must be taken with a grain of salt. Consider the fantastic story of Tobias, for example, which we find in the book of Tobit. Because Tobit has become poor and blind, he sends his son Tobias to Media to collect some money from a creditor there. Tobias's travel companion is a man who turns out to be the angel Raphael. When Tobias is attacked by a huge fish on the banks of the Tigris River, Raphael tells him to catch the fish and kill it but not to eat the heart, liver and gall. Gall, he is told, is a remedy for blindness, while the heart and liver, when spread on glowing coals, will produce a smoke capable of driving out a demon or an evil spirit.

Tobias makes good use of the heart and liver of this fish, for in Media Raphael brings him to the home of a man whose daughter has lost seven husbands, each one on the wedding night. Tobias is now given this daughter, Sarah, as his wife. The smoke produced by the heart and liver of the fish drives the demon Asmodeus out of Sarah. Sarah's father has already dug a grave for Tobias, but he closes it without burying his latest son-in-law. The gall of the fish is finally used to cure the blindness of Tobit, the father of Tobias, and thus the story has a happy ending. You see, then, what sort of thing goes on in these apocryphal books; we are in the world of fairy tales and Jewish fables.

*Apocryphal teachings.* When we read in II Maccabees 12 that Judas the Maccabean organized a prayer meeting to intercede for those who fell in battle with forbidden heathen idols in their possession, and that he collected a lot of money for a sin offering on their behalf, we frown in disapproval. The observation by the writer of the book that Judas did so because he believed in eternal life and the resurrection of the dead is no excuse in our eyes. When we ponder such passages, we can well understand why the Roman Catholics have always been so intent on regarding the apocryphal books as part of the canon: it is from such passages that they derive their Scriptural warrant for the practice of interceding for the dead.

I suspect you would also be somewhat surprised to read that no farmer, craftsman, blacksmith, potter, or any other such workman could ever become a Biblical scholar (see the 38th chapter of Ecclesiasticus or Sirach). This passage reflects the pride of the rabbi who looks down on working people: he knows that the world cannot get along without them, but he declares that they are not fit to be leaders in the “church.” And when the author of the Wisdom of Solomon tells us that he was good and therefore received an undefiled body (8:20), we are left with the impression that there is no original sin, and that the soul exists *before* the body.

I have given a few clear examples to show that the books that make up the Apocrypha are not always Scriptural in what they teach. Hence the church cannot accept them as binding, as part of the canon.

But this is not to say that it is a waste of time to read the Apocrypha. In our time the Apocrypha is available in a number of different translations. You will find this “devotional reading” of the Greek-Jewish world of 2000 years ago in seventeenth century English Bibles, in modern editions separate from the Scriptures, and in Catholic Bibles, e.g. the Jerusalem Bible.

*The composition of the New Testament.* We now turn to the origin of the writings that together make up the New Testament. At first there was an oral tradition about the deeds and sayings of Christ. Later various writers made efforts to put the preaching of Christ, which by then was being handed on in a rather stereotyped fashion, into written form. The Holy Spirit so directed this process that we have four "gospels" as well as a fifth historical book, i.e. Luke's Acts of the Apostles, which chronicles the expansion of the church throughout the Roman empire as the first evangelists preached the gospel.

That these writings were carefully preserved and later play an important role in the worship services, especially when the eyewitnesses to Jesus' ministry began to die off, is readily understandable. It is also understandable that Paul's surviving letters were collected and circulated (see II Pet. 3:16). It was not long before these letters of Paul were accorded the same authority as the Scriptures: in them the apostle spoke to the church after his death. The same sort of thing happened with the letters of some other apostles and with two letters by brothers of Jesus. These letters possessed such inherent authority that they were eventually included in the canon, the list of writings officially regarded as part of the Bible. The anonymous book of Hebrews and the prophetic book of Revelation were also accepted as divine Scripture.

*New Testament apocryphal writings.* The Christian church in the early centuries had a definite problem with apocryphal writings dealing with the New Testament era. It sometimes happened that the churches were so foolish as to accept books outside the canon as authoritative. A flood of spurious gospels, stories about apostles, letters and other revelations was produced. Many of these writings contained clear heresies.

The stories in these New Testament apocryphal works

are reminiscent of the tales in the book of Tobit. Let me give you an example. The so-called "Protoevangelium of James" tells of the miraculous birth of Mary, the mother of Jesus. Anna, Mary's mother, was barren and conceived a child only after both she and her husband were visited separately by an angel. Mary's story parallels Samuel's: at the age of three she was brought to the temple, for she had been consecrated to God. She spent her childhood in the temple, living "like a dove" and receiving her food directly from the hand of an angel. When she reached the age of twelve, the priests wanted to free themselves of the responsibility of looking after her. Therefore they summoned a number of widowers. Whoever's staff blossomed in the Holy of Holies would be allowed to take Mary as his wife. When Joseph's staff was returned to him, a dove came forth from it and flew around his head. This was taken to be a divine indication that Mary was to marry Joseph.

Later pseudo-gospels made this story even more beautiful by adding to it. Here we have clearly entered the realm of legends about the saints. If you are acquainted with Selma Lagerlöf's legends about Jesus, bear in mind that they are derived from ancient apocryphal gospels.

*The decision about the canon.* We can well understand why the church would want to erect a dam against such legends and speculation by fixing the canon. Yet, there has been some uncertainty about a few of the books accepted as part of the New Testament canon, i.e. James, Hebrews and Revelation. There are other books that were once accepted as canonical but are not part of our Bible today, e.g. the *Shepherd* of Hermes and the *Didache* (on the teachings of the twelve apostles).

On the basis of the contents of the writings themselves, a clear line was finally drawn between canonical writings and non-canonical writings. Such church fathers as Augustine and Athanasius played a role in drawing this line, which

At some point, they concluded, a final editor must have gone to work with “scissors and paste.” The result was the five books of Moses as we find them in our Bibles today.

*Projection.* The hypothesis that the Penteteuch received its final form at a relatively late date in history is tied in with the view that much of what we read in the five books of Moses is not historically reliable. Scholars argued that the writers of this material had wrapped the Penteteuch’s kernel of truth inside a blanket of their own projections. Legends and sagas about the patriarchs—and there were many of them in circulation in the time of Solomon and during the exile—were now given official status and turned into doctrine. Cultic practices that had arisen during Israel’s history were projected back to the beginning, i.e. the time of Moses.

But the historical unreliability of the Penteteuch is not important, according to these scholars. What really counts is the *message* that comes to expression in all the documents and legends.

The most important of these scholars was Julius Wellhausen (1844-1918). Wellhausen paid careful attention to the name of God used in any given passage. In some places God is called *Elohim* (translated in English Bibles as *God*) and in others *Yahweh* (normally translated as *LORD*, or even *Jehovah*). On this basis he distinguished between two separate authors who contributed material toward the Penteteuch—the Elohist (the author of the E document, in which God is called *Elohim*) and the Yahwist (the author of the J document, so called because the name of God used, *Yahweh*, begins with a “J” in German, Wellhausen’s language).

In time scholars made more such distinctions. They began to speak of a P document, which was supposed to be the work of priests who lived during the exile, and a D



eventually came to be accepted everywhere. At the synods of Hippo Regius (393) and Carthage (397), both in northern Africa, where there was then a flourishing church, this decision on the canon received official approval.

The New Testament canon has never been altered since that time. Yet we accept these books as the rule for faith and life not because the church accepts them but because the Holy Spirit testifies in our hearts to their authenticity and because they bear clear marks of authenticity (see Article 5 of the Belgic Confession).

## 5. Biblical Criticism

*The use of sources.* It is clear that some parts of the Old Testament are based on sources (see Num. 21:27-30). Thus the question of a given book's composition is not always easy to answer. The books of the Bible were not all written in as simple and straightforward a manner as a twentieth century essay for a literary journal.

What about Moses? Did he write the first five books of the Bible himself? Or did the Penteteuch assume its final form long after Moses' death through the work of some editor drawing on numerous sources?

*The documentary hypothesis.* In the nineteenth century, evolutionistic thinking reigned supreme. It also made its effects felt in the field of Biblical studies. Some scholars came to the conclusion that the Penteteuch is a compilation drawing on various independent sources.

But the advocates of the "documentary hypothesis," as this view is commonly known, weren't done yet; there was much more to be said. They started uncovering further source differences in the four documents they claimed to be able to distinguish. Before long they were talking about J, J<sup>1</sup>, J<sup>2</sup>, J<sup>3</sup>, E, E<sup>1</sup>, E<sup>2</sup>, E<sup>3</sup>, and so forth.

document, which they attributed to someone they called "the Deuteronomist."

When were these documents composed, according to these scholars? The J and E documents were assigned to the time of Solomon's reign. The work of the Deuteronomist was the basis of King Josiah's temple reformation, although it was later expanded. And the P document was produced by a circle of priests in exile who hoped to strengthen their own authority as priests by presenting the people with stories about priests who lived long ago.

*The rest of the Old Testament.* The Penteteuch is not the only part of the Bible to be subjected to such critical scrutiny. The entire Old Testament was examined microscopically by scholars of this persuasion. Chapter after chapter was read critically. The result? The other Old Testament books, it was decided, were also compilations from all sorts of sources arranged and reworked by some editor at a late stage. Some texts, it was argued, have even been altered deliberately.

As a result of the work of these scholars, the Old Testament was viewed by many as an anthology, a conglomeration of literature of various types in which numerous conflicting points of view come to expression. There are various "theologies" to be found in the Old Testament, it was said. The scholar's task is to unearth the "original" Old Testament, apart from all the additions and corrections.

*The evolution of apostasy.* This historical criticism could not help but undermine and weaken the faith of many. The masses began to turn away from the church as the advocates of unbelief claimed to have unshakable scientific evidence for their dismissal of the Bible as God's

Word. The application of the principle of evolution to the study of Scripture led to the evolution of apostasy!

The excavations in the Middle East in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries also played a role in this development. Babylonian stories about creation and a great flood were discovered. It was quickly decided that the narrative presented in the first eleven chapters of Genesis is a variation on an ancient Near Eastern theme. The Bible was born in Babylon!

*The New Testament.* The method of distinguishing sources has also been applied to the New Testament. First of all, the three “synoptic gospels” (Matthew, Mark and Luke) got a careful going over. The conclusion drawn was that there must have been a document on which all three drew (a “proto-Mark” or “first edition” of Mark) as well as a source containing the sayings of Jesus. The latter document is usually referred to as “Q.” (This letter was chosen because of the German word for *source*—*Quelle*.)

The first three “gospels” are then supposed to have originated from a reworking and editing of these two original sources. Luke, it was argued, did not assume its final shape until some time after the year 70.

As for John’s “gospel,” we are told that he, too, made heavy use of sources. Moreover, his “gospel” is supposed to date from some time early in the second century.

Paul’s letters were subjected to similar analysis. His authorship of Ephesians, Colossians, I and II Timothy, and Titus was called into question. The content as well as the style, it was argued, suggest a different author. The book of Revelation also became the subject of many curious hypotheses.

*Various “theologies.”* We must bear in mind that the scholars who produced this array of theories about “sources” took a critical stance over against the authority of

Scripture. The current interest in the “form-critical” approach to the “gospels” proceeds from the assumption that the early church used certain sayings of Jesus then in circulation as the point of departure for its own meditations. Eventually these meditations took on written form, and thereby the sayings of Jesus made their way into the “gospels,” which were handed on to subsequent generations of believers. The task of modern scholarship is to uncover the original words of Jesus under the deposit of tradition, meditation and reflection.

The stories about the miracles were likewise regarded as the early church’s way of giving expression to its own theology rather than as reports of events that actually occurred. The Old Testament, scholars argued, was produced mainly between the time of Solomon and the exile, as Israel gave expression to its beliefs via stories about the patriarchs and its own origin as a nation. The same model is then applied to the New Testament historical books: the early church gave expression to its own theology, its own set of beliefs, through its account of Jesus’ sayings and doings. This perspective is the key that unlocks the meaning of the “gospels,” according to these scholars.

Thus the New Testament is also to be read as an anthology containing a number of conflicting “theologies.” There is a theology of Jesus, a theology of Paul, a theology of Luke, and so forth.

It is clear that such an approach could only result in a dismemberment of the New Testament that left no room for a divine author. Moreover, this perspective on the New Testament has even been used as a justification for the lack of theological unity within the World Council of Churches: the same tensions and disagreements are present within the New Testament!

*Rudolf Bultmann.* One of the most important of all the

New Testament critics is Rudolf Bultmann (1884-1976), who was a professor at the University of Marburg (Germany). In 1941 Bultmann delivered a famous address on the New Testament and mythology. He argued that the world-picture of the New Testament is in essence mythological. We hear talk of heaven and hell, of the underworld, of angels and demons. In our day of science and technology, such talk is unacceptable; it makes no sense to us.

A person who makes daily use of electric light and radios, who looks to modern medicine for help when he gets sick, cannot believe in the world of wonders and spirits with which the New Testament presents us. And if he thinks he can, he must face the fact that when he identifies such beliefs with the Christian faith, he makes the Christian message incomprehensible and impossible for his contemporaries.\*

According to Bultmann, it is theology's task to free the Bible from the mythological world-picture. The issue that should concern us is the message—not that outdated world-picture. And the heart of that message is the appeal to become free of the world. (That's what faith means for Bultmann.) How are we to become free? By living not by the material realm or the flesh but by the spirit. (Hence all the talk about "the Spirit" in the New Testament.) Man must become what he is, which means that he must die with Christ and rise with Christ.

*Demythologizing.* Bultmann does not accept the resurrection of Christ as a historical fact. A Christian with an Easter faith is not interested in the question whether Jesus actually emerged bodily from the grave. The impor-

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\**Kerygma und Mythos*, Vol. I, ed. H.W. Bartsch, Hamburg-Volksdorf, 1948, p. 18. This work is available in English: see *Kerygma and Myth* (Harper Torchbooks, 1961), p. 5.

tant point is that an Easter faith has *eschatological* implications. We get a glimpse of these implications through the visionary experiences of the disciples.

If demythologizing is indeed our method, how do we apply it? To begin with, we let go of the surface content of the New Testament (and the Old as well). Anything that does not suit modern man or offends him must be stripped away. What is left is a “gospel” that the heart of modern man will find appealing. There is no need of any confession that Jesus is the Son of God or any belief in atonement for sin. But there is room for a “theology” of the church—provided that this “theology” is in agreement with the analysis of the human situation offered by the leading philosophers of the twentieth century.

We must be honest—honest to God! With this slogan, Bultmann and his followers hoped to win modern man for the gospel—by cutting out the heart of the gospel and offering a false gospel in its place. At bottom Bultmann’s approach is the approach already employed by the Gnostics in the second century: use some of the language of the New Testament—the Gnostics borrowed their terms from John’s “gospel”—and fill that language with a content of your own.

*The place of archeology.* Our belief in Scripture and its authority must be based on Scripture itself. It is not a conclusion we reach by studying archeological data.

Archeological investigations will never fully establish the veracity and authority of Scripture. Scripture has an independent, underived authority. It does not need human certificates of reliability.

This is not to say that our faith is not strengthened now and then when some disputed point in the Bible is confirmed by an archeological discovery. As Christians we should take a keen interest in archeology, for it can deepen our understanding of Scripture.

*Archeological data.* The recent finds with regard to treaties and diplomacy in the ancient Near East show us that the covenant structure we find in the Bible was already familiar in Abraham's time. And our growing knowledge of ancient Near Eastern civilization has led scholars not to be so quick to banish Biblical figures like the patriarchs to the realm of mythology. What the Bible tells us about the patriarchs and their culture fits in remarkably well with what we have learned about their times from other sources.

Moreover, the discovery of more and more early Bible manuscripts has led to a growing respect for the Bible's original text. The discovery of the "Gospel of Truth" (which dates from about A.D. 150) among the Gnostic scrolls at Nag Hammadi in 1945 has helped to refute Bultmann's contention that John drew on pre-Christian Gnostic sources that speak of a coming heavenly redeemer. It turns out that it's just the other way around: the Gnostic writers drew on John. Archeological discoveries have also shown that the situation described in Acts fits in with what we now know about the Greek and Roman world of the first century.

Thus, a great many objections against Scripture raised in the last two centuries have been shown to be unfounded. And we may confidently expect that the progress made by archeologists and the philologists studying ancient, newly discovered manuscripts will unmask even more of the attacks on the Bible as unfounded.

*The starting point.* But we should not lean on archeology as if to say: "The Bible is right after all!" Faith in the truth, reliability and infallibility of Scripture comes first: faith is our starting point. In the final analysis, this starting point is our only weapon against the advocates of demythologizing and a "theology of the church" in place of a message from God.

Faith in the Scriptures brings with it a blessing of its

own. That blessing is ours when we read the Bible prayerfully and grasp its meaning. The blessing is available to anyone in the modern world—provided he is willing to listen to the Bible respectfully. But anyone who starts peeling layers of myth and legend away from the gospel will wind up without any gospel in his hand. He will have no message at all to present to modern man.

## 6. Contradictions in the Bible?

*The “spirit of Jesus.”* Critics of the Old Testament like to appeal to the New Testament. They talk about the “spirit of Jesus” and assure us that Jesus spoke only of love. The “spirit of Jesus,” they argue, is incompatible with the “spirit of the Old Testament,” where the Lord is presented as a God of wrath.

Well, what about it? Why are there two testaments in our Bible? Are there really *two* covenants, the second superior to the first and completely different from it?

That’s apparently what Marcion, a second century Gnostic, thought. He dispensed with the Old Testament and published a shortened version of the New Testament, in which everything that reminded him of the Old Testament was eliminated.

*A “Jewish” book?* In the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, there were many voices in Germany that dismissed the Old Testament as a “Jewish” book that should be banned from the schools. The “nonsense and immorality” of the Old Testament, it was argued, has nothing to say to modern man and can safely be ignored.

But the Old Testament is not a “Jewish” book standing *over against* the New Testament. It is clear from the New Testament itself that Christ and the apostles regarded the Old Testament as their Bible. Christ is “the end of the law”



(Rom. 10:4). Moses was writing about Christ (John 5:46). Christ came to fulfill the law and the prophets, not to abolish them (Matt. 5:17). And what did Jesus do when He met the two sorrowful men walking to Emmaus? “Beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, he explained to them what was said in all the Scriptures concerning himself” (Luke 24:27 NIV).

Christ did declare repeatedly in the Sermon on the Mount: “You have heard that it was said . . . but I say unto you . . . .” But He was *not* taking a position in opposition to Moses. He was opposing the rabbis who had robbed the law of its power by applying it in the wrong way.

*The new covenant.* The “new covenant” is not a dispensation differing in structure from the old dispensation. What the gospel of the *new* covenant proclaims is simply that Christ has fulfilled the prefigurations and shadows and types of the old covenant, thereby bringing about complete forgiveness of our sins. Christ also received the Holy Spirit, who in turn equips the church for its worldwide task.

In the expansion of the church across the entire earth, we see a fulfillment of what Isaiah had prophesied so long before (Is. 42:1-7). Thus we are to view the new covenant as a fulfillment of the old covenant—and not as a break with the old covenant.

In the old covenant the Lord gave promises, but He coupled those promises with a demand for obedience. And He made it clear that apostasy will not go unpunished. The new covenant is no different in this respect.

*New Testament wrath.* It is not correct to picture Jesus as a man of love whose “spirit” is completely different from the “spirit” of the Old Testament. It is not true that the Old Testament’s psalms of imprecation or cursing are unchristian since the new covenant knows only of grace.

The element of wrath in the psalms of imprecation also comes through in the New Testament. In fact, these psalms are often quoted.

<i>Psalm</i>	<i>New Testament</i>
2:9	Rev. 12:5; 19:15; 2:27
69:22-3	Rom. 11:9-10
69:24	Rev. 16:1
69:25	Acts 1:20
109:8	Acts 1:20
137:8	Rev. 18:6
137:9	Luke 19:44

God is love (I John 4:16). But He is also a consuming fire (Heb. 12:29). We must learn to take the New Testament seriously—all of it. When we put “Jesus loves you” on posters and bumper stickers, aren’t we promoting an incomplete picture of the Savior, a picture we should instead be trying to correct? He also cried, “Woe to you!” and He often spoke of judgment.

The Father of Jesus is the God of the old covenant, who remains the same in the new covenant. The message is one. When we present it to others, let’s present all of it.

*Working hypotheses.* The advocates of Biblical criticism like to point to so-called contradictions in the Bible. The alleged contradictions are then presented to us as proof that the Penteteuch and the “synoptic gospels” are compilations drawing on many sources, such as the E, J, P, and D documents, “proto-Mark,” the Q document, and so forth.

Sometimes the assertion that the Bible is a human book full of errors is softened with an afterthought: what should concern us in the final analysis is Scripture’s purpose—not all the details. The fact that there are contradictions and errors should not upset us.

Really? Much depends on your attitude and starting point. If you begin with the assumption that the Bible is a

fallible book containing errors, that assumption will be your working hypothesis as you read. You will be eager to justify your starting point, and you will keep your eyes wide open for discrepancies in the Biblical data.

But if your starting point is the confession that the Bible is the Word of the one who cannot contradict Himself, even though it was written and handed on by frail human beings, your working hypothesis will be that the Bible is God's infallible Word. That working hypothesis can make a world of difference.

*Limitations due to sin.* Even though you accept the Bible as *God's Word*, you may still come across seemingly conflicting passages, passages that you cannot harmonize. But then you will not look at such passages in a proud, rationalistic way—"Another mistake!" No, you will say to yourself: "At this moment I simply don't understand. But my failure to understand must be due to some inadequacy on my part. After all, my mind, too, has been affected by the consequences of the fall into sin." And it's entirely possible that the mystery will be cleared up for you someday when you know the Bible better and study the passage more intensively.

*Copying errors.* When you come upon those puzzling passages, there are a number of factors to be kept in mind. It may be that what looks like a contradiction (e.g. between two numbers) is simply due to a copying error. Remember that there are no numerals in the original text: letters were used to stand for numbers. A copyist could easily have confused one number with another.

*Thematic composition.* As citizens of the Western world, we are used to arranging material in a chronological order. When we read the Bible, we can't help feeling that it's wrong on the part of the Bible's authors to place later

events before earlier events. What we tend to forget is that there may well have been a good reason for such a procedure: the event that comes too soon serves a *thematic* purpose.

Luke does this, for example, when he places Jesus' appearance at the synagogue in Nazareth at the beginning of his account of Jesus' ministry (Luke 4:16-30). Matthew does not get around to this event until chapter 13. This is not an error on Luke's part; it's simply an example of thematic composition.

Another example is the cleansing of the temple. John places it at the beginning, in chapter 2, for thematic reasons. The other gospel writers do not mention it until the very end, just before the Passover at which Jesus was arrested. Moreover, there are differences between John's account of the temple cleansing and the account we find in the "synoptic gospels."

What about those differences? Has John distorted this event for thematic purposes? This conclusion is necessary only if we assume that there was only one temple cleansing. But the Biblical record seems to indicate that there were two. What John presents us with here is the first of them, and at the same time he records a statement of Jesus that was later twisted by false witnesses at His trial (John 2:19; Mark 14:57-9). Thus it's not a matter of a contradiction at all. There is an explanation—if only we will take the trouble to look for it.

*Paraphrase.* When we read a record of what Jesus said, we must not immediately assume that someone actually wrote down Jesus' words as He was speaking. Remember: there were no tape recorders those days!

If you bear this in mind, the discrepancies will not puzzle you so much. In some cases it is clear that the gospel writer was *paraphrasing* what Jesus said (compare Matt. 24:15 with Luke 21:20).

The writers took their readers' background knowledge into account. Not every statement of Jesus could and would be understood exactly as He uttered it.

But this does not mean that the authors of the "gospels" changed the words of Jesus to fit their own opinions. For Paul, too, the gospel of *Jesus* is the background to every statement. Yet, Paul often uses his own words and figures of speech to present the gospel message—but without ever meaning to present a "theology" of his own.

*Circumstances.* Many of the alleged contradictions can be shown to be spurious once we take a careful look at the circumstances. In Luke we read that blind Bartimaeus was healed *before* Jesus entered Jericho (18:35—19:1). But in Matthew we read about Jesus healing two blind men when he was *leaving* Jericho (20:29ff). Critics of the Bible have pointed triumphantly to this contrast as proof that the gospels do not tell us Jesus' story in a coherent way.

Now, if we bear in mind that there was an old city of Jericho as well as a luxurious new city of Jericho that Herod had built a little farther down the road, the difficulties disappear like snow before the hot sun. Matthew was writing for Jews and therefore referred to the old city of Jericho, while Luke was writing for Theophilus, who would have been familiar with the new city of Jericho. Luke concentrates on one man (Bartimaeus) and has an additional reason for concentrating on the new Jericho: he wants to deal extensively with the story of Zacchaeus, the tax-collector, who lived in the Hellenistic Jericho.

*The authority of science.* I have pointed out only two of these blunders made by the Bible's critics; I could add many more. When scholars, relying on scientific methods, substitute their own authority or the authority of science for the authority of the Bible, they come up with some strange results in their efforts to prove that the message of

Scripture comes to us in a flawed wrapper.

Just how much authority does science have when it comes to the Bible? Does the Bible need scientific verification?

In many schools, colleges and universities around the world (in the industrialized west as well as the mission fields of South America, Africa and Asia), teachers and students have made it a game to try and destroy any belief in Biblical authority. See to it that you don't fall for their tricks. Nonsense about what "science" is supposed to have proven is not much of a replacement for belief in the authority of God's Word.

Remember that we are "more than conquerors" through faith (Rom. 8:37). Therefore we need not fear the attacks of the Bible's critics. In our hands we hold a powerful weapon—the Word of God, which is the sword of the Spirit (Eph. 6:17). Paul declares confidently: "It is written, 'I will destroy the wisdom of the wise, and the cleverness of the clever I will thwart.' Where is the wise man? Where is the scribe? Where is the debater of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world?" (I Cor. 1:19-20; Is. 29:14).

Let's not be afraid to do battle with the Bible's critics, then. But let's not be naive about the outcome of the struggle either. As soon as we overthrow one of their false criticisms of the Bible, they will have ten more ready to take its place.

Their stubborn resistance is no reason for us to get discouraged, however. What has become of all the liberal scholars who tried to undermine our faith in the Bible? They've gone the way of all flesh. But Scripture continues to stand secure and unshaken.

*No cheap arguments.* But this does not mean that we may enter the battle with cheap arguments as our weapons. Unfortunately, Bible-believing Christians do this all too

often—and then wind up making the same sorts of mistakes as their opponents.

If Biblical criticism has something to say to us, it is this: we must dig deeper into the Bible than we have ever done before. If we do, we will be amazed again and again at the marvelous unity of the 66 books of the Old and New Testaments, and our doubt will give way to an unshaken faith in the authority of God's Word. "And we also thank God constantly for this, that when you received the word of God which you heard from us, you accepted it not as the word of men but as what it really is, the word of God, which is at work in you believers" (I Thess. 2:13).

## **7. The Unity of the Bible**

*Bible fragments.* Earlier we saw that certain scholars divide the Bible up into various sources, each with a voice and viewpoint and "theology" of its own. Such an approach to Scripture is hardly intended to help us see the unity of the Bible.

We must not forget that many people know only a few fragments of Scripture. They may be familiar with a number of stories and sayings, but they do not know the Bible as such. Such partial, fragmentary knowledge keeps them from seeing the Bible's unity and harmony.

You know from experience how people generally pick up their knowledge of the Bible. Their first contact with it is through a story Bible from which stories are read to them as children. As the Bible stories are presented, they are accommodated to the children to make them more interesting. They are dramatized and romanticized, and anything that might offend the children or upset them is removed. Such a reworking of the Bible stories succeeds in capturing the children's interest, but they are left with the

impression that the Bible is a book of stories about interesting people.

When they finally pick up the Bible and start reading it for themselves, they can't help but be a bit disappointed. First of all, it is not written in the style of a story about the wild west. In fact, it's written in a sober, concise manner. Some parts of the stories presented by the Sunday school teacher are not even to be found in the Bible. And certain other aspects of the stories are ignored entirely in Sunday school. Finally, the context and background of the story comes through in the Bible's own account.

If you have grown up with Bible characters and special texts that you had to memorize, you may not know what to make of the Old Testament prophets and the letters of the New Testament. It will cost you a great deal of effort to figure out how all the laws and proverbs and "dogmatic" letters form a unified whole that also includes the "beautiful" stories you were told as a child in Sunday school, when *you* were placed at the center of it all.

*No loose sand.* You grew up with fragments—stories and sayings. How do those fragments relate to what you are now reading in the Bible? As a child you may have thought that anything in the Bible that did not fit in with the beautiful stories was for "grownups" only. But now that you are an adult yourself, do you know what to make of all those complicated statements by wisdom poets, prophets and apostles? Or would you rather stick with the romantic stories and close your ears to all the rest?

Once we realize how important it is to *listen* to the Bible, we will proceed from the confession that the Lord is *one* (Deut. 6:4; Zech. 14:9; Mark 12:29; James 2:19). His revelation is also one; it is a unified and harmonious whole.

Whether you're a child or an adult, center stage does not belong to *you*. It belongs to *the Lord*, our King, who



speaks His royal Word to us. All of that Word is important, even if it does not come to you in the form you prefer. You are called to know and experience more and more of the unity of the Bible.

This demand is laid upon you by the God of the one covenant in Christ. The words of Scripture are not grains of loose sand that refuse to stick to each other. The Old Testament comes to us as the harmonious and deeply meaningful canon of the old covenant. And the New Testament is the canon of the new covenant, which in turn helps us interpret the Old Testament in a truly Christocentric way.

*The Penteteuch as basis.* The five books of Moses (the Penteteuch) are the basis of the Old Testament canon. They present us with the redemptive history that led up to the covenant at Sinai—creation, the fall into sin, the flood, the covenant with Noah, the covenant with the patriarchs, the move to Egypt, and the exodus from Egypt (Gen. 1—Ex. 18).

In Exodus 19-24 we read about the covenant that the Lord made with Israel at Mount Sinai. Central to this covenant are the Ten Words, which are followed by the book of the covenant. From Exodus 25 to the end of Deuteronomy, we read about the years in the wilderness and the covenant provisions through which obedience to the Ten Words was made more concrete. The blessings and curses tied in with the covenant are emphasized.

*Prophetic history.* From Joshua through Kings we get more of Israel's history, written from a prophetic point of view. These stories cover the conquest of Canaan, the time of the judges, and the period when Israel was ruled by kings.

The books of Chronicles, Ezra and Nehemiah again form a whole and show us that the Lord never gave up on

His temple project but preserved a remnant for Himself despite all the apostasy. Even during and after the exile, the Lord remained with His people.

In all these books, we see that the heroic deeds of men are not made central. The “historical” books show us how *the Lord* maintained His covenant, through blessings and curses, just as He promised He would do. These things were “written down for our instruction” (I Cor. 10:11).

Again and again it is made clear that the Lord is true to the oath He has sworn. The seed of the serpent tries to destroy the Church. But God’s faithfulness reaches right across the waters of the flood and the bitterness of the exile.

The “historical” books present us with a moving testimony in which we are shown that the covenant offices do not have the power to save the people. We are introduced to false prophets, to priests who are far from spotless, and to kings who go astray. We also read about true prophets who are rejected by their own people, and kings who want to do what is right but cannot hold back the apostasy of the people.

In all of this we hear a cry for the great Priest-King, Jesus Christ. All those Old Testament laws about the tabernacle and the offerings and the cleansings and the feasts point to the Redeemer who serves as both the priest and the sacrifice.

*Poetic writings rooted in the covenant.* The other books of the Old Testament presuppose all of this material. The Psalms and Lamentations give us a sense of the struggle Israel underwent in its relationship to God as it sought to win the covenant blessings. As we read them, it’s almost as though we were present in a temple service. We look right into the hearts of the praying believers. How they plead for the fulfillment of God’s promises! How they complain about their suffering! How earnestly they confess their

sins! How grateful they are for the deliverance they have received, and how they yearn for the ultimate redemption! We are shown how deeply Israel believed the words of Moses: “The LORD will vindicate his people” (Deut. 32:36; Ps. 135:14; Rom. 12:19; Heb. 10:30; Rev. 18:20; 20:4).

Wisdom books like Job, Proverbs and Ecclesiastes are intended to help the covenant people stay on the Lord’s path and accept His leading. The book of Proverbs can be read as a commentary on the ten commandments. It’s not just some wise old man’s outlook on life. In this book we find concrete applications of the fear of Yahweh, which is the beginning of wisdom.

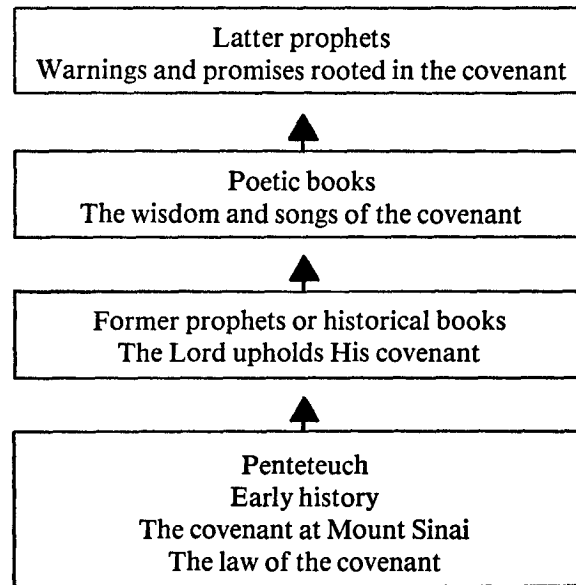
Thus these “poetic” books are based on the Penteteuch. Their foundation is God’s covenant with His people.

*The prophetic appeal to the covenant.* The same can be said of the prophets. As you read their writings, it’s just as though you are joining ancient Israel in a worship service.

You hear the prophets base their plea on God’s covenant as they appeal to the people to serve the Lord. The “major” and “minor” prophets speak of God’s promises, demands and threats. Their words are rich in variation; yet they are emphatic about making the same points over and over. They cling to the “law of Moses,” pointing back to the provisions of the covenant and the earlier redemptive deeds of the Lord, which are a guarantee of the Messianic deliverance to come. The prophets also point to the sanctions, the threats contained in the law of Moses. Those threats would surely be carried out, they warned, if the people of the Lord did not repent. Thus the prophets stood on the shoulders of Moses—and on their predecessors’ shoulders as well.

*The structure of the Old Testament canon.* We see, then, that the different types of writings in the Old Testament

are by no means unrelated. The Old Testament canon is built up on the basis of the Penteteuch, as follows.



*The New Testament canon.* In the New Testament we find a similar pattern. In the “gospels”—remember that the four “gospels” present a single message or story—we find the early history of the salvation that has come to us in Christ. We are told about His sacrifice on the cross, through which the blood of the new covenant was poured out to atone for our sins, and His resurrection from the grave, through which it was proven that His sacrifice was not in vain.

Thus the four “gospels” correspond to the Penteteuch. Hence we might speak of the “gospels” as the “Tetrateuch.” (This term means *fourfold instrument*, just as *Penteteuch* means *fivefold instrument*.)

On the basis of the “Tetrateuch,” we are to read the

book of Acts as a “historical” book paralleling the Old Testament “historical” books. In this book we are shown how the new covenant functioned in equipping the churches (Pentecost) for continuing the gospel appeal to Israel to accept Christ and ultimately for spreading the gospel all the way to Rome.

The letters and the book of Revelation correspond to the Latter Prophets of the Old Testament. Through them we are invited to listen to the preaching in a New Testament church. The letters as well as the Revelation to John were intended to be read aloud in church services (Col. 4:16; I Thess. 5:27; Rev. 1:3; see also Jer. 29:1ff).

The Lord used these writings to instruct His redeemed people about His promises, demands and threats. “If any one has no love for the Lord, let him be accursed. Our Lord, come! The grace of the Lord Jesus be with you” (I Cor. 16:22-3). All of this is based on the “Tetrateuch.”

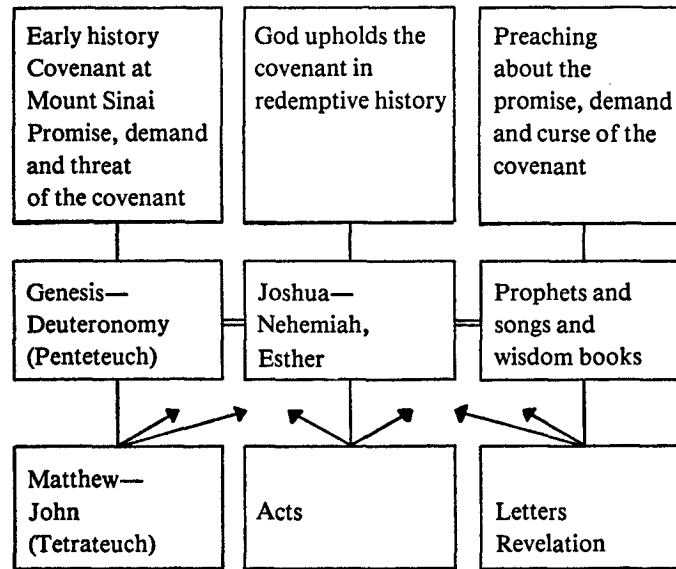
*Old Testament and New.* The Old and New Testaments also fit together neatly, just as the respective books within each are interrelated. The prophets appeal to the “law of Moses,” the Penteteuch. “Cursed be the man who does not heed the words of this covenant which I commanded your fathers when I brought them out of the land of Egypt, from the iron furnace, saying, Listen to my voice, and do all that I command you. So shall you be my people, and I will be your God” (Jer. 11:3-4; Deut. 27:26; 4:13, 20; Lev. 26:3, 14ff). The psalms speak the same language: “He declares his word to Jacob, his statutes and ordinances to Israel” (Ps. 147:19).

We find the same pattern in the New Testament. The apostles appeal to the gospel, the “Tetrateuch.” “If any one is preaching to you a gospel contrary to that which you have received, let him be accursed” (Gal. 1:9).

The entire New Testament is full of references to the Old Testament—the Penteteuch, the “historical” books, the

“poetic” writings, and the prophets. Thus there are many cross-connections, making the whole Bible a harmonious, interconnected whole.

Perhaps an illustration will give you a concrete idea of what I mean.



## 8. Reading the Bible

*A shorter Bible?* Christians claim to love the Bible, but sometimes they can't help asking why God has given us *this* Bible. Why has He given us such a long book? Couldn't the Bible have been a little shorter? Is it really necessary for the Bible to tell us *at such length* how God wants us to serve Him? Why are so many events recorded in the Bible? Why does it include so much war and bloodshed? Why does it give us all those genealogies and spicy stories of harems and womanizing? Why so many laws?

Why do we need Chronicles in addition to Kings? Why *four* gospels? Why didn't the Lord formulate His message in a simpler way?

When we read the Bible, we have to work our way through a whole library—indeed, an archive. Wouldn't a short catechism have served better as God's revelation? Why do we need such a long—and often dark—Bible? Isn't the very *form* of the Bible already a stumbling block for modern man?

To this question I have no other answer than that it pleased God to give us the Bible in this form. And I must go on to add that the Lord chose to reveal Himself in *redemptive history*, the history about which Scripture tells us. The Lord descended into the midst of human history, as it were. He accommodated Himself to man. After the fall into sin, He promised deliverance through a certain line of descent. The entire Bible tells us of that deliverance.

Over against the one seed (the descendants of the serpent, i.e. Satan), there would be another seed (the descendants of the woman). The seed of the woman is the Church—and ultimately the one who became the deliverer of the Church, i.e. our Lord Jesus Christ.

*The language of redemption.* Try looking at that lengthy Bible from this point of view. Then the detail and length will no longer be a hindrance, for everything you read will remind you of the *grace* of the one who refused to let go of mankind but kept things moving ahead to the coming of the Redeemer. The Word became flesh. Yet, how would we know this if the Word had not also become Scripture? Thus every page of the Bible has something to tell us about Jesus Christ. We don't need the help of exegetes and Bible commentaries to see this for ourselves.

Since Adam, history has been covenant history. The Lord preserves His Church and abides by His promises.

His faithfulness reaches right across the waters of the great flood. He reveals His salvation to Israel.

Even the laws given by Moses speak the language of redemption. The tabernacle, the sacrifices, the purifications, and the holy festivals all foreshadow the one who is our great Priest, the one who sacrificed Himself for us.

The “historical” books of the Old Testament testify in a moving way to the *impotence* of the priests and kings; they cry out for the coming of the great Priest and King. This perspective lays bare the unity of the “poetic” books and the prophetic books.

Can we ever get *too much* of God’s gracious struggles to bring His people back from the paths of unrighteousness on which they embark repeatedly? Do we find it tiresome or offensive to read long accounts of how prophets like Ezekiel and Jeremiah admonished and comforted the people of God in concrete situations? Anyone who takes offense at such passages is taking offense at God’s grace, which bends down to our level in these passages.

The length and detail of the Bible is no hindrance to someone hungry for salvation—even if he is a pampered child of the twentieth century. Instead the very extensiveness of the Biblical record is a *help* to those who apply themselves seriously to the task of getting to know God. God was so gracious as to allow His Word to become Scripture. Let’s be thankful for all those psalms and prophecies and genealogies. Let’s count our blessings one by one and learn to recognize God’s love in all of them. Everything in the Scriptures points to the Word that became flesh.

*A record of covenant faithfulness.* We should not have to ask why there are *four* gospels. Instead we should be delighted that we possess these four separate portraits of Christ. As for those profound and often difficult letters of



Paul, don't they introduce us to the many facets of God's grace?

Actually, we are being shamefully ungrateful when we complain about how scrupulously God has provided us with official written records and reports of His covenant faithfulness, His struggle to win the hearts of His people, and His patience in the face of our apostasy. Isn't it wonderful that we can simply read some of the sermons of Haggai and listen to Paul as he both inspires and criticizes congregations of believers?

Therefore we should be thankful that God did not give us the gospel in the shortest possible form but rather let us have those 66 books that give us a clear insight into His redemptive deeds in history. That thick Bible is not wasted on a church engaged in evangelism. On the contrary, it contains a compelling message for an unbelieving world. Those who have not grown up with the Bible will surely be all the more stirred by the song of mercy and redemption it sings—if only they will take the trouble to read it.

It has been argued that uniformity is the curse of modern life. Those who feel this way should welcome the colorful abundance and variety we find in Scripture. Our deliverance is sketched in a stunning way that makes a deep impression on us. We are exposed to a rapid succession of documents, including chronicles, laws, prophecies, songs, and letters. In all these documents we hear the same Voice speaking to us. Thus says the Lord! Hear, O Israel! Listen to your God!

*Read, O Israel!* There are Christians who never tire of insisting that the Bible is God's infallible Word. You couldn't pay them to say that the Bible is not infallible. Yet, some of these enthusiasts don't bother to read the Bible—at least, not all of it. They have their favorite passages, of course, and they can quote a few texts. But if you were to ask them to summarize the contents and main

emphases of a certain Bible book, they would be speechless.

If these Christians were recent converts who had just come into the church, I could understand it. But some of them have grown up in the church and have been exposed to the Bible all their lives. They have learned to say that God's Word is the foundation for our lives, but they have not learned to be curious about that foundation.

When we receive a letter from a friend far away, we do not focus all our attention on one sentence somewhere in the middle. We read the entire letter through. As we read, we take into account what we already know from previous letters. If we know the author of the letter well, we try to read between the lines; we consider his motives and the background of his thinking. In such a way we come to an understanding of the letter in our hands. And that's just what we should do when we read the Bible.

I wrote this book for no other reason than to help you approach the Bible in such a way. I'm well aware that what I have to offer is nothing more than a beginning. My purpose is simply to show you something of the pattern, the major emphases, and the redemptive message in each Bible book. At the same time, I have tried to make it clear how each book fits in with Scripture's dramatic presentation of the whole sweep of redemptive history.

*Customs and tools.* God does not speak to us directly from heaven as He spoke when Jesus was baptized in the Jordan. He sends His Word to us through human beings and their work. The Bible on your table came off a printing press, the same kind of press that is used to produce other books.

Bear that in mind. God wants us to use human customs and manmade tools as we struggle to gain a better understanding of His Word. There is plenty of assistance available for those who really want it.

Take the wonderful custom of reading the Bible at the table after a meal. We must never let go of this custom. But to make the most of it, each member of the family should have a Bible open before him. That way no one's thoughts will wander, and everyone will be able to join in the discussion after the passage is read. Such discussion is necessary if the main point is to sink in properly. Let's not forget that many a seemingly familiar passage is widely misunderstood.

We should also read the Bible on our own—and not just when we are called on to lead a Bible study group or give a short devotional talk. And we should make sure that we get around to all the books of the Bible in our private reading—even the ones that seem foreign and forbidding.

*Bible study.* Let's not overlook the many Bible translations now available. We can get a lot of help from them. But for our daily Bible reading we should not use too free a translation. Yet, it may be helpful to consult a free translation now and then to get some fresh light on a difficult passage.

As you read the Bible, don't be afraid to underline a sentence that strikes you as especially significant. God gave us the Bible to use—not to put on display. Keep track of related texts. Watch for the repetition of key words and phrases. To make the structure of a passage clear in your own mind, put some notes in the margin. Perhaps you could number the central points. And circle the climax of the passage you are studying. Remember that the Holy Spirit is the real author of the Bible. Thus you shouldn't be afraid to admire the beauty of the Bible's composition and structure.

The Book of books is an unalloyed, precious treasure. Be careful how you treat it. Let yourself be swept up by it so that it gives direction to your life. Even if you study the

Bible all your life, you'll never exhaust its riches and meaning.

There are more means God has provided to help you get yourself oriented in Scripture—study Bibles, commentaries, atlases, Bible dictionaries and encyclopedias. Use them gratefully, but don't be too quick to believe everything they tell you about the Bible. Let God's Word be your guide!

# Genesis

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## 1. The Book of the “Generations”

*The beginnings of world history.* The first book in the Bible, which the Greek translators of the Old Testament called *Genesis* (i.e. origin or beginning) is one of the five books of Moses (the Law, the Torah). These five books together are called the Pentateuch.

In Exodus we find an account of Israel’s departure from Egypt and a record of the laws given at Sinai. Genesis, however, gives us the background to Israel’s history. Exodus shows us how God remembered His covenant with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob (Ex. 2:24), while Genesis describes how the Lord first made this covenant with the patriarchs and started to gather His Church from their posterity, so that one day all generations would be blessed.

This redemptive event is sketched for us in Genesis against a certain background: the creation of the world, man’s fall into sin, the flood, and the continuing degeneration of the nations. This picture of the beginnings of world history contains some heavy black lines. Yet, light is not entirely absent. When Israel began to read the

Torah, she already came across the promise of the Messiah in the very first book of “the Law” and was reminded there of God’s covenant. That covenant would one day make Israel’s seed a blessing to all the nations.

*Redemptive history.* The first book of the Bible teaches us not to separate world history from redemptive history, the history of the covenant. At once we are given a breathtaking perspective on all of human history as the Lord reveals something of His *purpose* in His deeds. Why was the earth created, and what is its destiny? What is the meaning of human life, and what is the place of the Church? Genesis gives us answers to these questions. It shows us that the purpose of the creation of heaven and earth and the genesis of the human race is the ultimate gathering of God’s elect to form the Church. The destructive forces in this possessed world do not have the last word. Christ is the final Victor. The Seed of the woman will smash the serpent’s head.

The book of Genesis is not a handbook of science or history, although it does in fact contain some history we need to know. Genesis is a book that gives us comfort. It reveals some eternal certainties to people living on this cursed earth. It tells us that the world was created by God, and also that the mighty Creator will not let go of the world—despite the existence of sin—but has chosen the Church and the covenant as the path to a new paradise.

*Ten “toledoths.”* The division of our Bible into chapters was not the work of the authors of the Bible. There was no such division until it was introduced by a certain Stephen Langton, who died in 1228. The division into verses first appeared in a 1551 edition of the Bible published in Paris. These divisions are somewhat artificial and do not always do justice to the content of the Scriptures. Sometimes a break is introduced into a continuous passage, and

sometimes two passages are run together when they could better have been kept separate.

Therefore we would do well to ask whether the original writers of the Bible included any divisions in what they wrote. In the case of Genesis, there are definite divisions to be found: we read of ten separate “toledoths” or “generations” or beginnings. Each one of these toledoths tells the story of a certain generation.

The toledoths give us a way to divide Genesis into sections. The book is made up of the toledoths of the creation of heaven and earth (2:4); Adam (5:1); Noah (6:9); Noah’s sons (10:1); Shem (11:10); Terah (11:27); Ishmael (25:12); Isaac, the son of Abraham (25:19); Esau, i.e. Edom (36:1); and Jacob (37:2).

Again and again we have a new beginning. Yet, each beginning follows from what came before. Each time we have a genesis, a birth, a new generation. It is along this path that the Lord brings His salvation and gathers His people Israel. Thus in the New Testament we read about the “genesis” of Jesus Christ (Matt. 1:1).

## **2. In the Beginning**

*A choice.* “In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth.” When you read the opening sentence of the Bible, you are already confronted with a choice, a choice for or against Scriptural revelation. If you choose for the Scriptures, that sentence forces you to ask yourself whether you regard this revelation about the Creator and Redeemer as a *guide* for life with all its difficulties.

Do you accept what God’s Word says about the creation as part of the “Christian doctrine of *salvation*”? Do you believe that the God who made a covenant with us is also

the Creator of heaven and earth? Do you believe that He is as faithful as He is powerful? Are you repelled by the stumbling block of the Christian doctrine of creation which has the words "unacceptable for our time" written all over it?

Don't forget that just as the first sentence in the Bible forces you to make a decision, every sentence in the Bible involves a choice. I don't propose to go on repeating this point in every chapter; that's why I am putting such emphasis on it at the *outset*. In this age when the remote nooks and crannies of the universe are being explored, the Bible claims to be your guide to the truth, the only guide to life with all its difficulties.

*The origin of the world.* "In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth." The Israelites who read this sentence long ago were surrounded by nations that clung to the strangest myths about the origin of the world. Those nations worshiped animals and stars as though they were gods; they believed that there were powerful evil forces at work in the sea and the air.

All these heathen ideas exercised a certain influence on the Israelites; in fact, they threatened to dominate Israel's thinking. But now God had something to tell His people at the beginning of the Law, the opening of the book of Genesis. He squarely contradicted all the idolatrous Babylonian and Canaanite theories about the formation of the world out of some primordial principle, or a struggle between two opposed powers, or a cosmic marriage between deities. Heaven and earth, the Israelites learned, were not made of primordial elements that had always existed. It was the *God of Israel* who alone created time and space. Through His Word, the God who ruled the stars called everything into existence in a creation week that ended with a sabbath.



*The sabbath.* Israel knew the purpose of the sabbath from its worship practices: it was the day of rest after six days of work. Now then, the story of creation showed the Israelites that the idea of the sabbath was already based on how God created the world.

The Lord reminded them of this at Sinai: “Remember the sabbath day, to keep it holy. In six days the LORD made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that is in them, and rested the seventh day; therefore the LORD blessed the sabbath day and hallowed it” (Ex. 20:8, 11).

*The crown of creation.* When we read what happened on the various days of creation, we see a certain pattern:

<b>A1.</b> Light.	<b>AA4.</b> Sun, moon and stars.
<b>B2.</b> Waters on the earth and the firmament.	<b>BB5.</b> Fish and birds.
<b>C3.</b> The land becomes dry, and plants and trees begin to grow on it.	<b>CC6.</b> Land animals and man.

Man, who came last, was the *crown* of creation. The world was furnished and made into a suitable home for man to inhabit. The sun, moon and stars were given to him as a calendar and clock. The creatures that lived on land and in the sea were to be subject to him.

Adam (i.e. man) was not just one link in the chain of living creatures or a magnificent product that nature brought forth by chance. No, the Lord created man after His own image, that is, as His representative, His regent on earth. Man, created both male and female, was given the mandate to multiply, to govern the creation, and to cultivate it.

The description of the days of creation ends with the announcement that God saw that what He had made was good. After the creation of man we read that it was *very* good. The time for the sabbath had come. God would now rest from His creative labors.

### **3. The Toledoth of Heaven and Earth (2:4—4:26)**

*Man in Paradise.* After this introduction follow the ten toledoths. Once the creation is an accomplished fact, the *history* of the covenant begins. Some Bible translations therefore insert a heading here. Now we are shown how man was created and placed in the Garden of Eden.

The “Paradise” of which we read was a garden with many trees, including a tree of life and a tree of the knowledge of good and evil, as well as a river of life. Man was given a positive task, namely, to cultivate this garden and watch over it.

But there was also a potential danger in this situation: man was given a certain commandment to “test” him. He was *not* to eat of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. The punishment for breaking this commandment would be death. He was warned to be on guard against temptation.

Man was given woman to be his helper. He received her with a song. Thus the first song in the Bible is a husband’s song of delight in his bride (Gen. 2:23). It happens that the last exclamation in the Bible also has to do with a bride; it is the utterance of the bride of Christ, the Church (see Rev. 22:17). Thus there is a similarity between the beginning of redemptive history and its end. Paradise was soon to be lost, but it would all be regained—complete with the river of life and the song of the bride.

*The fall into sin.* Paradise lost! The woman chose to ignore the warning about temptation and allow the serpent to tempt her. The serpent then poisoned her with the seed of falsehood and doubt. By promising her that she would become like God, he managed to persuade her to taste the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. That fruit certainly looked delicious. Adam followed her lead and tasted it too.

Suddenly the harmony was gone. The harmony between God and man as well as the harmony between men was shattered by this act. The man and his wife were ashamed before their Creator. They covered their nakedness with fig leaves. When the Lord came down to call them before His tribunal, they turned on each other, each blaming the other.

*Judgment.* Then came the judgment, which would apply to all of Adam's posterity. Genesis 3 begins by speaking of the serpent, the woman and the man—in that order. But God confronted the three in just the opposite order. When He pronounced judgment, however, He reverted to the original order, speaking first to the serpent, then to the woman, and finally to the man.

He began by cursing the serpent or snake. When we read that the serpent was to crawl on its belly, we are not to assume that it had not done so before the fall. What this expression means is that the snake would not be special among the animals but would be nothing more than a snake.

The same applies to God's judgment on the woman and the man. The position of both was simply made more difficult. Their life was now to be subject to a cycle: "You are dust, and to dust you shall return" (3:19).

At the same time the Lord decreed something about their relationship in the future. Before the fall woman was already subject to the authority of man. By accentuating

the subordination of woman *after* the fall had taken place—look what the deed of that “emancipated woman” had led to—God showed His favor. Within the covenant of grace, the husband was to remain the head of the wife (see I Cor. 11:3).

*A promise.* No, it was not all darkness. The earth had been cursed because of man (see Rom. 8:20ff), but the creation was also to be delivered from corruption’s grasp together with man. Man was not to be cursed as such.

Thus there was still some light to be seen. Instead of a curse, man was given the mother of all promises:

I will put enmity between you [i.e. the serpent] and  
the woman,  
and between your seed and her seed;  
he shall bruise your head,  
and you shall bruise his heel (Gen. 3:15).

This declaration has rightly been viewed as an allusion to the coming of the Messiah. But there is more involved in this prophecy. Two “seeds,” two peoples, two groups stand opposed to each other: the children of satan, who follow the “serpent,” and the seed of the woman, that is, the Church, the children of the promise. In Revelation 12 we read of a vision in which this idea is worked out further.

Man was soon driven away from the tree of life by the cherubs that guard God’s throne. He was not driven out so that he would forever live in misery and failure; he was driven out so that he would no longer have access to the fruit of the tree that would guarantee him life.

Despite all the judgment, the light continued to shine: Adam’s wife could be named *Eve*. She would be the mother of all mankind. The splendor of the “mother-promise” beamed down on mankind, which had fallen so deeply into sin.

The “history” of heaven and earth was governed by the

God of the covenant. It is striking that after Genesis 2:4, the name of God used is no longer *Elohim* (usually translated as *God*) but the specific covenant name *Yahweh* (usually translated as *LORD*), the name claimed by the God who brought Israel out of Egypt. The Israelites could therefore regard these events after the creation as the deeds of *their* redeeming God. That was something to hold on to. Enlarging our perspective, we could say that the one working behind the scenes was the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.

*Grace.* If we keep this thought in mind, there is an abundance of grace to be seen in these first chapters. This strikes us even more when we compare them with other “creation accounts” and with the theory of evolution.

There is an ancient Babylonian myth in which Marduk, the chief god of Babylon, fights a fierce battle with Tiamat, the monster of chaos, and kills him. From his body he then forms the universe. But here we are talking not of *creation* but of a *forming* of the world out of material that existed beforehand. This is a far cry from the creating Word of the *one and only* God.

In the Babylonian account there are a number of gods, with the good and evil forces standing over against each other from the very beginning as powers roughly equal in strength. Marduk himself is a descendant of Tiamat, the primordial principle.

Actually, this creation account is really an evolution account, for the world develops to its present state because of powers and forces *inherent in it*. There is no mention of a *genuine creation*. Every year a national god surrounded by other gods overcomes the forces of winter. Nor do we hear anything of a fall into sin. In fact, “good” is part of the same family as chaos and evil.

Thus you can see that the original story has been *bastardized*. There is no mention of a “mother-promise” such as

we find in Genesis 3:15. Instead we have a myth that tries to explain the phenomenon of life. Because the “creation” is seen as a devastating blow against the dragon, because it is not understood as a powerful act of one almighty God, there is no room for the struggle and triumph of Christ (the Seed of the woman) over the dragon (satan and his forces).

Anyone who refuses to think in terms of a genuine creation through the Word of God but instead views everything as developing out of some original cell or chaotic power or cosmic egg closes his eyes to the revelation of the re-creating God, the God who is busy fashioning a new heaven and a new earth through Christ’s redemptive work. Over against all ancient and modern myths, the Scriptures teach the creation of the world, the fall into sin, and deliverance or redemption through the work of Jesus Christ.\*

*Without form and void.* There is a so-called “gap theory” according to which an expanse of time elapsed between verses 1 and 2 of Genesis 1. In this “great interval,” the fall of the angels is supposed to have taken place. As a result of this fall, the earth turned into chaos: “The earth was without form and void.” It is then argued that the days of creation brought about a restoration of the order that existed before chaos intervened.

This doctrine (which is in essence theosophical) must be rejected. Genesis 1:2 does not say that the evil forces of chaos and darkness ruled the earth like a great dragon or

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\*Klaas Schilder writes: “*That is indeed my greatest objection against the evolutionist principle: the battle is not about the skulls and origins of apes and men and birds but about the reality of a distinct and distinctly operative Word of God. That Word presents the complete drama of covenant breaking and covenant restoration; it already works this out and proclaims it in the case of the very first man—all of this in a world subject to a divine calling according to the capacity of every creature*” (*Heidelbergsche Catechismus*, III, Goes, 1950, p. 310).

leviathan—a power that Yahweh then had to oppose. This verse only maintains that the creation was still in need of order and structure. The words “without form and void” do not mean that the earth was some sort of chaotic force *opposed* to God.

Here we must be on guard against any Gnostic dualism that would view matter itself as possessed by some sort of sinful power. Man, too, is “without form and void” at the very beginning, before he is born. But that’s not the sinful thing about man. “Thy eyes beheld my unformed substance,” we read.

Thou knowest me right well;  
my frame was not hidden from thee,  
when I was being made in secret,  
intricately *wrought* in the depths of the earth  
(Ps. 139:16, 14-15).

*Cain and Abel.* In the first family children were born—Cain and Abel. (Were they twins?) When an offering of Abel’s was accepted while Cain’s was not, Cain killed his brother out of jealousy. For the first time, the earth from which man had been formed was drenched with human blood.

That blood cried out to heaven and would continue to cry out throughout all of human history (see Job 16:18; Ps. 9:12; Matt. 23:35; Heb. 12:24; Rev. 6:10; 16:5-7). It would cry out for judgment until it was drowned out by the voice of Jesus’ blood, which brought about the definitive judgment but also testified to complete forgiveness and reconciliation.

Cain was punished by way of a curse. Yet, there was a tempering of the punishment. God gave him a sign indicating that he was not to be killed.

From Cain’s loins arose a race of people who achieved a great deal in cultural respects. We read of a “city,” of the discovery of metalworking, of music, and of the beginning

of nomadic life. But we also hear the haughty, boastful song of Lamech, which is an ode to revenge (Gen. 4:23-4).

*Seth.* We are told that Seth was born in the place of Abel. In his household the service of the Lord was not forgotten. It was in his time that men began to call on the name of the Lord.

Here we find the beginning of two “lines,” the two communities—the seed of the woman and the seed of the serpent, the Church and the apostate church. What we are given here is not the history of tribes or nations but the *history of salvation*. God’s promises are fulfilled in the course of history.

#### **4. The Toledoth of Adam (5—6:8)**

*Genealogies.* The toledoth of Adam gives us a long genealogy. As inhabitants of the Western world, we don’t care much for genealogies. Perhaps you don’t even know the name of your great-grandfather. But such indifference to ancestors is not often found among “primitive” peoples; the small children are already taught to recite the names of their forefathers.\* For them a genealogy is a song.

We find a similar love of genealogies among the Israelites: the Bible is full of “family trees.” Yet the genealogies in the Scriptures are not intended to glorify anyone’s forefathers but only to describe how the Lord has

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\*This is true of the Bantu tribesmen, for example. In his book *Transvaal Ndebele-texts* (Pretoria, 1930), N.J. Van Warmelo gives various lists of heads of families, beginning around 1600. These names have been passed on orally over the centuries. For these people, the family tree became a song.



led His Church; they are intended to help us understand God's way of salvation.

*Seth's line.* We should take note of the fact that the very first genealogy does not mention Cain and his descendants. Only Seth's posterity is listed. In Seth's line we find Enoch, the man who walked with God and was taken away directly by Him (see Heb. 11:5 and vs. 14-15 of Jude).

There is also a Lamech in Seth's family. This Lamech prophesied that his son Noah would bring relief or *comfort*—the name *Noah* is probably related to this word—from the tiresome work with the earth (Gen. 5:29).

The genealogy ends with Noah. The longing for a comforter was heard in a world groaning under the curse.

*Ripe for judgment.* This world groaning under the curse was becoming ripe for judgment. The worship of power and sensuality brought about an increasing degeneration and lawlessness. The "sons of God," who may have been kings, took all the wives they wanted, following Lamech's example (see 4:19; 6:2). This led to the birth of giants: the race was improved!

Yet, judgment kept coming closer. The Church seemed to be at the point of disappearing from the earth. But God gave man a stay of execution of some 120 years. The Church and the world were fused in a gigantic—and at the same time demonic—culture. God was sorry that He had ever made man. Only Noah found favor in His eyes.

That's how this toledoth ends. God had to protect man from himself. There were still believers in Seth's line, but there was no father of believers, no special covenant with a certain family. Seth's line cried out for such a covenant. And the first world cried out for a second.

## 5. The Toledoth of Noah (6:9—9:29)

*Noah's ark.* After the 120-year period of grace during which the world was given time to repent, there was even more wickedness and depravity on the earth. Then God sent the great flood.

God showed Noah a way to escape the wrath: He instructed him to build an ark, an enormous boat in the shape of a box. Assuming that a “cubit” is equal to half a meter, the length of the ark was 150 meters, its breadth 25 meters, and its height 15 meters. The volume of such a box would be over 56,000 cubic meters.

This ark was built as a three-story building. It would have to hold not just Noah and his family but also seven pairs of each clean animal and one pair of each unclean animal. A food supply and a simple ventilation system made life on the ark possible.

*The flood.* After Noah entered the ark with his family and all the animals, a furious storm broke loose. This led to a flood; all the living creatures on the earth perished. The ark floated on the swollen waters. Finally the rain stopped, and the ark came to rest on the mountains of Ararat (in the northeastern part of the country now called Turkey).

By releasing some birds, Noah found out that the earth was habitable again. At God's command, Noah and company then left the ark. The first thing Noah did was to build an altar and make the greatest sacrifice of animals that the world had ever seen—a universal offering. Noah had brought many animals suitable for sacrifice into the ark (i.e. the “clean” animals). In the name of the entire creation, he now offered a sacrifice to God to try to calm His wrath. The Lord accepted this sacrifice, which had a “pleasing odor.” In this way Noah did indeed bring relief

from the curse with which the earth was afflicted (5:29; see also 8:21).

*A covenant.* The Lord now proceeded to make a covenant with Noah. Never again would He allow such a flood. After this there would always be a regular cycle of seasons. The world would be the ground on which the Church could build.

Behind the sacrifice made by Noah we catch a glimpse of the sacrifice made by Jesus Christ. It is for His sake and for the sake of His kingship, which is dawning throughout the world, that the world still exists. Golgotha is tied up with the course of history, the rotation of the seasons, and the balance we find throughout the universe. It is Christ's return that will finally put an end to the order of things that we call our world. That's something to hang on to in this age of the atom! Baptism and deliverance are closely connected in the ark (see I Pet. 3:20-1).

The creation blessing can now be repeated (9:1ff). Man is given power over the animals. But in order to counteract certain heathen practices, he is forbidden to drink blood. (Blood was widely regarded as the locus of power and life.) The shedding of human blood is also expressly forbidden under the covenant with Noah. Man is made in the image of God.

The rainbow is the sign of the covenant which the Lord made with Noah, his family, and all living creatures. God would remember His eternal covenant. Never forget that when you see a rainbow. Remember Noah's sacrifice, which brought us relief from our affliction. Because of the sacrifice made by Noah, and especially because of *Christ's sacrifice*, the farmer today can plow confidently and history can unfold. It's all because of the *grace of God!*

*Other flood stories.* In this context I would point out that there are other stories of a great flood in ancient times; in

fact, there are quite a number of them. There is a Babylonian story definitely reminiscent of what we read in Genesis. The Babylonian Noah, who is named Utnapishtim (i.e. the one who found life) built a huge ship that protected him, his family, and the animals. He also sent out birds (a dove, a swallow and a raven). Like Noah, his “ark” came to rest on a mountain, and he offered a sacrifice after leaving it.

Yet, his entire story is related within the framework of a fairy-tale world, as the truth is held down in unrighteousness. Utnapishtim manages to build his boat in *seven* days, and the flood only lasts a week. The main cause of the flood was a poorly thought-out decision which Enlil, the chief deity, managed to ram through the council of the gods. Utnapishtim is alerted to the plan by Ea, another god. Before he enters the safety of his boat, Utnapishtim makes merry with his fellow citizens. Thus he was hardly a preacher of righteousness. After he leaves the ship, he does offer a sacrifice—with all the gods swarming around him like flies. The chief goddess, Ishtar (Astarte), lets the gods know of her displeasure. Enlil, who was the cause of all the misfortune, then elevates Utnapishtim and his wife to the status of divinities.

In this story all thought of sin and judgment has been lost. The Babylonian Noah becomes a “superman,” while the gods are left squabbling about the reason for the flood. We hear nothing whatsoever about a *covenant*. Utnapishtim is the great exception, the one who found life.

This contrasts sharply with the picture of Noah found in the Scriptures. Noah was not invited to join the citizens of heaven. The flood was not the final judgment; after the flood life continued according to the old pattern. We read that Noah cultivated the earth, and planted a vineyard, and drank too much wine. This led to a crisis in his household.

*Noah's prophecy.* In the person of Ham, we encounter the same perverse spirit that was later to come to the fore in his posterity, i.e. Canaan. As you recall, the Israelites were commanded to wipe out the Canaanites because of their complete and utter godlessness. The sexual debauchery of these people even carried over into their religion: they worshiped Baal and Astarte (Ishtar) as gods of fertility.

Noah was granted a prophetic look into the future when he awoke from his drunkenness. It's significant that something of the Messianic promise is again highlighted in the words he spoke. Shem was blessed, which is an indication that the Messiah would be one of his descendants. Japheth received a blessing too. But Canaan, one of the sons of Ham, was cursed. He was to be a slave to his brothers.

These shadows are projected far into the future. Here Israel could read how God arranged everything according to His plan for His Church. A separate nation was to arise out of Shem's loins. This nation was to bring forth the Messiah and thereby be a blessing to all the nations—even to the accursed Canaanites (see Matt. 15:21-8).

There are some people who believe that *all* the descendants of Ham (by which they mean all black people) labor under this curse—even after Pentecost. This is not so; we must not make the mistake of supposing that *all* of Ham's descendants were subjected to the curse pronounced by Noah. Only *Canaan* was cursed. (The *effects* of this curse are clearly evident in Israel's history.)

After Pentecost, there is no longer any room for special treatment of particular nations. God is no respecter of persons. Anyone in *any* nation who honors God and lives righteously finds favor in His eyes (see Acts 10:34-5). In this world, where "Shem," "Ham" and "Japheth" have intermingled so much, Christ addresses us with His catholic gospel: the one who is to rule eternally gathers the *nations* to Himself.

## 6. The Toledoth of the Sons of Noah (10—11:9)

*The nations in review.* Soon the revelation of the Lord was to be restricted to the circles of Abraham's descendants. But before this revelation bids the nations farewell, all of them pass once more in review.

Israel was not to forget the nations, despite the fact that the dispensation of salvation was "narrowed down." This narrowing was necessary to ensure the Church's preservation in the world. The Church would have to exist temporarily within the bounds of a certain special nation if the covenant was not to be destroyed. Once the Messiah had come, however, salvation would be for all the nations.

In the period from Adam to Abram, then, the Church was made up of men of *all* nations. In the period from Abram to Pentecost, it was restricted to the descendants of *Abraham*. But after Pentecost, it would again take in men of *all* nations. When we read the family tree of the nations, we must therefore realize that it represents not just a "farewell" but an "au revoir," a "till we meet again."

*Israel as a light.* Israel was placed among the nations to be a light to them. The great flood had wiped out all the descendants of Cain. All the people left on earth were descendants of Seth and Noah; they were born within the church, as it were.

There is a clear message in this genealogy. We should note that it pays little attention to the largely unknown nations descended from Japheth and a great deal of attention to the descendants of Shem and Ham. Because mankind is *one* in its origin, Israel may not pretend that the calling to be a blessing to all the nations is something strange and incomprehensible.

*The tower of Babel.* The division of mankind into various nations after the building of the tower of Babel

was necessary as part of God's plan for Israel. In the future the people of God would be surrounded by enemies, but those enemies would be divided and would quarrel with each other.

The fact that they were scattered all over the world created a balance that hindered the growth of sin somewhat. The condition of mankind before the flood would not recur.

In our day, too, when internationalism is in fashion, centralization is hindered by racial and cultural differences. This brings a partial halt to the operation of the power of sin. Thus the differences between the nations in our time should be seen as an indication of God's favor toward His Church, for it stands in the way of the formation of one, overwhelmingly superior power. The Church faces not one enemy but many.

## **7. The Toledoth of Shem (11:10-26)**

*Israel's genealogy.* Here again we read a series of names, many of which were mentioned in the previous chapter. But this genealogy has a different purpose than the previous one. The previous genealogy dealt with the various nations (with Israel as the unseen midpoint), but here everything starts with the forefather of Israel, the nation God chose as His covenant partner.

Genesis 10 gives us a "table of the nations"; it describes the great expanse of territory which the Messiah would claim as His *sphere of operation*. But Genesis 11 shows us how the Son of God forges a path via *Shem's* descendants, a path that leads to His coming into the world and ultimately to Pentecost. The holy chain traced for us in God's revelation begins with Shem.

*Tradition.* Of course there was also apostasy to be found in Shem's line. When Joshua took leave of the people of Israel, he reminded them how their fathers had served idols in Mesopotamia (Josh. 24:2, 14-15).

The fact that people lived to be so old those days helped to assure the preservation of the tradition. (It's possible that this genealogy leaves out some names and covers a longer period than one might suspect; in other words, it may be that it is not complete.) When there was reformation in the family of Terah, an appeal could be made to history, to God's past deeds that had not been forgotten.

## **8. The Toledoth of Terah (11:27—25:11)**

*An exodus.* The wide-ranging focus is narrowed again. The toledoth of heaven and earth and all the nations finally leads to the toledoth of Terah. His small family (especially his childless son Abram) now assumes the central position.

The genesis of Terah begins with an exodus. He leaves the highly "civilized" yet deeply heathen city of Ur and keeps moving until he reaches Haran, where he dies. But the great trek continues. Abram is commanded to leave his father's family behind and go to the land that Yahweh will show him. At the same time childless Abram is given a promise: he will become a great nation. Through him all the families of the earth, which has been cursed, will be *blessed!*

*God's promises.* Here you can clearly see the line of God's promises forming. First we are shown the misery that has hung over the earth like a heavy cloud since Adam's fall into sin. Thorns and thistles spring up. Blood is shed and soaks into the earth. There is a great flood to



wash away all the violence and transgression. From the Church there arises a sign over the burden of work on the earth cursed by the Lord (5:29).

After Noah's sacrifice, God said: "I will never again curse the ground because of man" (8:21). The promise to Shem could now be realized as a *blessing* announced to Abram, a blessing that bears on all the nations of the earth. "I will bless those who bless you. By you all the families of the earth shall bless themselves" (12:3).

*A foreigner in Canaan.* We then see Abram moving on to Canaan, buoyed up by those powerful Messianic promises that guarantee him his land and the future of his line. Yet he is still without land and without children. He lives in that thoroughly corrupt land of Canaan as a "foreigner," as a nomad whose presence is barely tolerated in a region in which every campsite is at the same time a place where Baal and Astarte are worshiped. Canaanite idolatry deified the land as well as family and blood.

It is not without reason that we are informed in Genesis 12:6 that the "Canaanites were in the land" at that time. Abram was severely tempted in that godless environment. Therefore the Lord appeared to him once he had set up his tents at Shechem, the unofficial capital city of the Canaanites. Abram had to learn to wait on Yahweh in all things.

He received a specific promise: "To your descendants I will give this land." Abram's response to this promise was an amen: he built an altar to the Lord at Shechem, the place where the Canaanite religion had established a center for the worship of the Baal of the covenant (Baal-berith). Only through *believing obedience* would the Lord allow the unfolding of what He had promised in the way of land and descendants.

*Faith in the promise.* The point to remember as you read Genesis is that God's promise is the dominant theme. God in His grace chose to preserve a "remnant" in an apostate world. That remnant (the Church, the new humanity) has a future and will one day claim its full inheritance. But its future and inheritance will not be won by way of human accomplishments; there will be no reason for "flesh" to boast. Contrary to man's plans and deeds, God will realize His promise by way of His wondrous power. The patriarchs would have to learn to hold on to this invisible promise in faith.

Therefore the history to follow must be read as the history of a *promise*. Genesis is not a collection of the biographies of the heroes of faith. On the contrary, it shows how much sin there was in the tents of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob.

I am impressed again and again by the Bible's refusal to disguise human sinfulness or sweep it under the carpet. The direct language of the Bible includes no euphemisms for sinful practices—although translators and preachers sometimes introduce them. All the same, there are indeed many things in the lives of the patriarchs of which the Scriptures say nothing; we are left in the dark about things that interest us.

The reason for this is that the Bible is not a collection of fables or stories with a moral or a modern psychological slant. What we find in the Bible is a chronicle about the beginning of the Church, about God's gracious way with His people, about the approach of the Messianic future promised by the Lord.

Remember this as you read further. Don't forget to apply it to other Bible books as well. If you do, you'll be spared many disappointments. You won't have to ask: Why is this in the Bible, and not that? Instead you will immerse yourself in a very respectful way in the history of God's covenant and salvation, knowing that the Lord is

the same yesterday, today and forever. He is the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob; He is the God of all the living. And He wants to draw you into His redemptive history too.

*Abram in Egypt.* As we read on in Genesis, we see Abram temporarily moving from the land of promise to Egypt, because of a famine. The Nile delta, of course, was the breadbasket of the Near East. As an outsider in Canaan, Abram could hardly rely on the harvests there.

In order not to endanger his life during his stay in Egypt, Abram resorts to a trick: he pretends that Sarai is his sister rather than his wife. Because of her great beauty, Pharaoh might want her for his harem and kill Abram to get her. By this trick Abram endangers the promise made to him and even benefits materially when Sarai is indeed taken by Pharaoh. It is only because of the intervention of the Lord that Abram and his wife are able to return safely to Canaan.

This episode clearly demonstrates that if the promise is fulfilled, it will not be because of what any human being—even a “hero of faith”—has done but only because of God and His decrees. In other words, the promise will be fulfilled only by grace. When Abram worshiped at the altar he had built earlier in Bethel, he apparently confessed this (13:4).

*Abram and Lot.* Abram’s nephew Lot had always traveled with him. Eventually they would have to part company, for Abram was the bearer of the promise. A quarrel between the herdsmen of the two men led to a peaceful parting of the ways.

Abram proposed that Lot choose an area as his own domain. Lot chose the Jordan Valley, near Sodom and Gomorrah. The natural surroundings were reminiscent of Paradise, but the perverse population was the very op-

posite of man in his sinless state (see 13:10, 13). Abram remained behind in the drier hill country—but he was the bearer of the promise! (vs. 14-17).

*Melchizedek.* Before long Lot got into difficulties with the people in the area in which he had chosen to settle. It was only through the intervention of Abram and his allies that he and his household were saved (ch. 14).

In the aftermath of the struggle, Abram made the acquaintance of Melchizedek, the priest-king of Salem (Jerusalem), who blessed him and received a tenth of the booty. In the Letter to the Hebrews we read a good deal about Melchizedek. Abram, the forefather of Levi, from whom all the Israelite priests were descended, recognized the office of priest-king, which was greater than the later Levitic priesthood. Abram's great son Jesus Christ was also more than a Levitic priest: He was a priest-king after the order of Melchizedek (see Ps. 110).

*God's covenant with Abram.* Although Abram was a man of great power and wealth, he was still an outsider, a "displaced person," a guest in the land of Canaan. Furthermore, he was childless. Therefore the Lord came to encourage him by repeating the promise. Indeed, He entered into a *covenant* with him to prove that the inheritance was secure and that an heir, a natural son, would be born.

We already read of a *covenant* in connection with Noah. We saw that the covenant was made after Noah offered his great sacrifice. The covenant with Abram would likewise have to be confirmed by way of a sacrifice.

The patriarch was instructed to slaughter a number of sacrificial animals, cut them in two, and lay each half over against the other. Then he waited. When vultures descended to eat the carcasses, he drove them away. The sun went down, and Abram fell into a deep and troubled sleep, the kind of sleep that precedes a nightmare. A little later he

saw a smoking fire pot and a flaming torch passing between the two halves of the slaughtered animals.

It is clear from what the Lord said to Abram that this vision symbolized what was to come. The Lord promised Abram descendants. They would be oppressed for a long time in a foreign land. (Apparently the vultures and the darkness represented the oppression of the Egyptians.) In the fourth generation they would return to take over the land of Canaan and wipe out the sinful Amorites. (The smoking fire pot may represent the pillar of cloud, the pillar of fire, the exodus from Egypt, and the events at Mount Sinai.) Contrary to all human expectations, the Lord's favor would result in the *realization* of the covenant promise (ch. 15; see also Jer. 34:18).

*Hagar and Ishmael.* Abram was to become a father, then. This promise led Sarai to give Abram her Egyptian slave Hagar so that he could have a son by her. She was following a custom of the time: archaeological investigations have established that a son born to a slave under such circumstances would in effect be regarded as the lawful son of the slave's mistress.

Now, Hagar did indeed bear Abram a son—Ishmael. Yet, even before the child was born, there was trouble between Hagar and Sarai; Hagar was ill-treated by her mistress and fled. The angel of the Lord made her return and gave her a promise: her son would be a "wild ass of a man," that is, one who would have difficulties getting along with others, but he would become the father of a nation all the same.

Here for the first time we read about the "angel of the LORD," a messenger who represented the Lord, acting and speaking in His name. This messenger has sometimes been called "Yahweh's adjutant."

Ishmael is the father of the Arabic peoples. When we ponder this fact, we can well understand the Lord's con-

cern about him. It was God's wish that the Ishmaelites should come forth from Abram's tent.

*The God of Easter.* Ishmael was not the promised seed. Abram's attempt to realize the promise through Hagar was futile. It was a manmade solution; it was the way of the flesh. Abram had to learn to believe that God is the God of the living, the God of Easter, the God who makes the dead come to life. If Sarai was no longer a potential mother, God would make her fruitful again (see Rom. 4:16ff).

To bring this promise home to Abram, we see how the Lord *again* confirmed His covenant with him, this time by changing his name to *Ab-raham*: Abraham was to become the "father of a multitude," the father of nations. Sarai's name was also changed. She became *Sarah* and was promised that she would be the mother of nations; kings of nations would come forth from her. From then on the sign of this covenant would be circumcision.

*Circumcision.* Baby boys were to be circumcised at the age of eight days. Part of the foreskin around the end of the penis, the reproductive organ, would be cut away—hence the term *circum-cision*. Through this practice, the nation that was to arise from Abraham's loins would always be reminded of the connection between reproduction and the covenant with the Lord.

There were other nations that practiced circumcision. In Egypt, priests and princes were circumcised. Among some African peoples, circumcision is part of the rites of puberty by which boys join the ranks of full-grown men and warriors. Even today there are millions of circumcised men in the world.

For the children of Abraham, circumcision would have a different meaning than for the pagans. It *sealed God's promises* of a homeland, of descendants, and of a Messianic future; it symbolized the unwavering faith-

fulness of Yahweh. Since circumcision involved such a vital organ, it taught the Israelites not to say: “*We* will build a great nation.” Here, too, God’s hand was writing: “By grace alone” and “Circumcise your hearts!” (see Deut. 30:6; Jer. 4:4; Acts 7:51; Rom. 2:28-9; Col. 2:11).

*Sarah’s laughter.* It is not easy to live by grace. Therefore the Lord announced the good news once more to Abraham and his wife. The patriarch was then living by Hebron under the oaks of Mamre, a place where he had built an altar.

Three men came to visit him, and he received them hospitably. One of them was Yahweh Himself. Abraham was assured once more that he would have a son by Sarah. Sarah, who overheard this assurance, laughed in disbelief (18:12-15; see also 17:17). No word of promise would be too much for Yahweh to fulfill (18:14; see also Luke 1:37; 18:27).

*Sodom’s destruction.* The Lord also revealed something else to Abraham: the area where Lot lived was going to be destroyed because of its great godlessness. When Abraham heard this, he pleaded for Sodom in a moving way. The Lord promised him that He would spare Sodom if there were ten righteous men to be found there.

But when the two angels went to Sodom for Lot’s sake, it soon became apparent how depraved its inhabitants had become. Today we still use the word *sodomy* to refer to the homosexual copulation between men that had become so popular in Sodom (see also Rom. 1:24-7). Abraham and his allies had earlier saved Sodom, but their intervention had done nothing to bring about moral reform in that wicked city.

It turned out that *ten* righteous men were not to be found in Sodom (see Gen. 18:32). The angels had to evacuate Lot and his family. Lot’s wife stopped and looked

back (see Luke 17:28-9, 32). “Remember Lot’s wife,” Jesus warned. There is no averting God’s judgment. Suddenly it struck the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah.

It is clear from the Bible’s sketch of Lot’s family (19:8, 14, 31-8) that it was difficult for anyone in Sodom to remain free of the “spirit” of Sodom. Moab and Ammon, who were Lot’s children through incest, became the founding fathers of nations living near Israel. Later they were to cause Israel a great deal of trouble. Yet Ruth, who was a Moabite, was also one of the ancestors of David and, through him, of the Lord Jesus Christ.

Here again we see *grace* shining through. As long as Christ has not yet returned, there is still time to break with the spirit of Sodom. Nevertheless, God’s revelation undeniably presents a grim picture of what went on in Sodom (see Is. 1:10; 3:9; 13:19; Jer. 49:18; 50:40; Ezek. 16:48ff; Amos 4:11; Zeph. 2:9; Deut. 32:32; Lam. 4:6; Rom. 9:29; II Peter 2:6; Jude, vs. 7; Rev. 11:8).

*Covenant judgment.* Noteworthy in these texts is that Moab and Ammon are not the only ones who face the kind of judgment that struck Sodom. The judgment in most of these texts applies to Abraham’s seed, i.e. the Church.

This is a very important point, for it shows us that we have no reason to boast about being Abraham’s seed. The covenant is always *conditional* in character. As the father of all believers, Abraham was called to command his sons and his house to follow him in walking the way of the Lord by doing what is just and right. Then the Lord could give Abraham all He had promised him (18:19). Sodom and the later judgment on the people of Canaan must always be viewed in the light of the covenant promises: that’s what will happen to you if you do not repent.

*Isaac and Ishmael.* After we are shown in chapter 20 how Abraham again commits the sin of telling only part of



the truth (this time during his forced stay in the land of the Philistines), chapter 21 tells us about the birth of Isaac, whose name means *laughter*. This was the miraculous birth long promised by God.

Abraham became a father and received a “seed”—*through faith* (Rom. 4). In Ishmael he received a son “born according to the flesh” (Gal. 4:29), and in Isaac a son born according to the promise. The line toward the Messianic future would run through Isaac (17:19).

If Ishmael would only accept the fact that the special honor was reserved for Isaac, there would be a future for him. But as Ishmael grew up, it became clear that he was not at all interested in reconciling himself to God’s will. At the Lord’s command, therefore, the slave Hagar was driven out with her son (21:8ff).

Ishmael was to become a great nation, and the Lord’s hand protected him out there in the wilderness. Moreover, Ishmael remained a factor in the history of the Church. Paul drew a line from him to the Jewish synagogue of his time, the “present Jerusalem,” the synagogue that tried to lead its children into the slavery of seeking salvation by keeping the law. He contrasted this “present Jerusalem” with the Church, the heavenly Jerusalem, which is free. The Church is made up of children “born according to the Spirit” (Gal. 4:21-31). “Now we, brethren, like Isaac, are children of promise.” In other words, we are born out of the *power of God’s promise*.

*Abraham’s sacrifice.* That promise is even mightier than death. Abraham was called to believe this when the Lord commanded him to kill his son Isaac as a sacrifice. “He considered that God was able to raise men even from the dead” (Heb. 11:19). Hence he got Isaac back as a prefiguration of the ascension of Christ. Again he lived by *Easter faith* (see Rom. 4:16-22).

That's why his faith also counted as righteousness. It was now apparent that his faith could withstand the test. Abraham's faith was active along with his works and was completed by works! (James 2:22). Now Abraham could become the *father of all believers*.

The angel of the Lord stopped Abraham just as he was about to kill Isaac. He then spotted a substitute sacrifice nearby—a “lost sheep,” a ram caught by its horns in a thicket. Thus the Lord had provided him with an animal for his sacrifice (22:13, 8).

This shows us again that God's providence is more than a general administration of the world's affairs: it is closely bound up with the deliverance brought about by the Lamb standing by the throne, the Lamb who has ransomed the people of God through His blood (Rev. 5). Because of this providence, Abraham could assure Isaac that a sacrifice would surely be provided on the mount of the Lord (22:14). The mountain on which Abraham's *substitutionary* sacrifice was made was Moriah, where the *temple* was later to be built. The point to remember, then, is that God does indeed “provide”—but always through the *covenantal Mediator*, the Lamb who rules out of Zion.

*Machpelah.* When Sarah died, Abraham showed once more how firmly he believed in God's promises, which are stronger than death. Although he was a foreigner without the full rights a native would enjoy, he bought a burial site from the Hittites who ruled Hebron at that time. He did not want to use someone else's property for a grave.

The cave at Machpelah, which was to become the burial place of the patriarchs, was the first piece of property to be handed on to successive generations. Thus a grave served as a pledge of the promise of life (ch. 23). The purchase of the grave at Machpelah shows that Abraham was not a stranger or foreigner in the sense of a pilgrim disdaining

the world. He knew that the land had been promised to him.

*A wife for Isaac.* If the holy line was to continue, Isaac would have to marry. Abraham must have been sorely tempted to establish a close relationship with one of the local families by marrying Isaac to one of their daughters. By virtue of such a marriage, Abraham and Isaac would no longer be regarded as “foreigners.” Yet, such a marriage would involve a Canaanizing of the seed of the promise. Therefore Abraham found a wife for his son in an area to the northeast, where some of his relatives still lived. Rebekah, the sister of Laban (whom we will encounter a little later), was willing to become Isaac’s wife.

Once Isaac was properly married, Abraham could die, for his life was *complete*. He had lived long enough, and he died at a ripe old age. Under the protection of God’s grace, his holy line of foreigners would be continued. The shining promises were stronger than death.

## **9. The Toledoth of Ishmael (25:12-18)**

*Ishmael and his kinsmen.* The angel of the Lord had said of Ishmael that he would live “over against” his kinsmen (16:12). The next toledoth shows that this Word of the Lord came true: we read that Ishmael “settled over against all his people” (25:18).

These “kinsmen” were not just the descendants of Isaac but also Abraham’s sons through Keturah, the woman he married after Sarah’s death. Before he died Abraham sent Keturah’s sons away to the east (25:1ff).

Ishmael’s name means *God hears*. It is an apt name, for God did indeed fulfill His promises to Ishmael. Ishmael

became the father of twelve princes, just as the Lord had promised Abraham (17:20).

*A separation.* We should take note of the fact that Ishmael's descendants did not build cities. They were to live in tents as nomads. As Calvin points out, God so ordered things that although Ishmael lived near his brothers, he lagged behind them in terms of the kind of dwelling he lived in. As a result, he did not mingle with them but lived "over against" them.

Here again we see a *separation* taking place, so that Isaac's seed will be able to remain Church and one day take possession of the inheritance. In time the *twelve tribes of Israel*, which arose later than the twelve tribes of Ishmael and also lived in tents, would receive possession of the inheritance preserved for them, i.e. the land and the cities.

After this point Genesis is silent about Ishmael's nation, which quickly attained its destiny. Attention is focused on the Church instead. The question is raised: *How* will the Church receive her inheritance? *How* will God's covenant promise be realized?

## **10. The Toledoth of Isaac (25:19—35:29)**

*Two nations.* For the first twenty years of his marriage, Isaac remained childless. Not until he was 60 did he receive the blessing of children. Thus he suffered the same anguish his father Abraham had gone through before him.

It appeared that not only the *family* but the *Church* itself had entered a blind alley. The Lord made Isaac wait in order to teach him and us that the Church's future depends not on human strength but on His sovereign will alone.

The freely exercised power of the Lord is the leading

motif in the stories that follow. Even when the Lord lets up and Rebekah becomes pregnant, she is told:

Two nations are in your womb,  
and two peoples, born of you, shall be divided;  
the one shall be stronger than the other,  
the elder shall serve the younger (25:23).

*Esau and Jacob.* Esau was the ruddy forefather of Edom. (His name means *ruddy*, whereas Jacob's name was already an indication of his ambition, his willingness to strive for a goal.) As Esau grew up, he chose for the life of a hunter and disdained the traditional life in tents, which his brother Jacob preferred. Yet we must not picture Jacob as a weak, indoor person: we are shown that he possessed tremendous physical strength (see 29:10; 32:24-5). Jacob deliberately tailored his "vocation" to the traditional pattern of life within the cultic community.

Furthermore, he stopped at nothing in his efforts to gain the patriarchal birthright, which belonged to Esau by virtue of the fact that he was the first-born. Esau was not interested in the birthright, and therefore he eventually let Jacob buy it. Through his own cunning and trickery, Jacob wanted to make sure the promise to Rebekah ("The elder shall serve the younger") would be realized.

In chapter 26 we are told that Isaac also spent some time as a foreigner in the land of the Philistines during a famine. The Lord told him not to go to Egypt, and He confirmed the promise He had already made to Abraham. After various ups and downs, the promise was repeated (26:2ff, 24) and Isaac was commanded to build an altar at Beer-sheba.

*The blessing of the first-born.* At the age of 40, Esau demonstrated his willingness to give up his alien status: he married two Hittite women and thereby established ties with the local population—to the great disappointment of

his parents. Yet Isaac continued to favor him (25:28) and therefore wanted to give him the blessing due to him as the first-born. Although Esau had surrendered this right, he was still eager to receive the blessing.

But there was also the Lord's promise to consider. Rebekah, who was always attracted to Jacob and favored him, managed to win the blessing for Jacob through a trick. She succeeded in fooling her aged husband, who was blind by then. Mistaking Jacob for Esau, Isaac blessed the shrewder of his two sons and designated him to rule over the other.

When Esau found out what had happened, he begged his father in tears to change the blessing, but it could not be done. All Isaac could promise him was a partial lightening of the yoke his brother Jacob would impose upon him. Esau's posterity would inherit what Esau had chosen—no birthright, life far from the heritage of the patriarchs, and dependence on the sword.

In the planning and scheming of people at cross purposes, we see the triumph of God's sovereign will. God had wanted the greater to serve the lesser.

*Jacob's valley of purification.* Of course this did not mean that a golden age automatically dawned for Jacob. Abraham's inheritance was only to be gained *through faith*. Therefore Jacob first had to pass through a deep valley of purification. The one to whom the inheritance was promised had to run for his life.

Because of Esau's murderous plans, Rebekah sent Jacob away to her brother Laban, under the pretext of finding a wife there. The one who had received the blessing was forced to depart in haste. But he took with him Isaac's renewed blessing (28:1ff).

It made quite an impression on Esau that Jacob was sent away with a blessing from his father. He changed his ways by taking a wife from his own "family"—a daughter of

Ishmael. Yet we can hardly accept this act as evidence of a genuine conversion, for Ishmael was outside the line of the Church.

*Jacob at Bethel.* How did things go with Jacob? Genesis does not give us a biography of Jacob. We should not ask: What became of the traveler Jacob? Instead we should ask: How did the Lord build His Church through Jacob and so fulfill the promises He made?

When we adopt this perspective, the first thing that draws our attention is the *mercy* revealed in God's election. When Jacob lay down in Bethel to sleep, the Lord revealed that He wished to be Jacob's God. In His own time He would bring Jacob back and give him numerous descendants. Jacob would be allowed to share in the Messianic blessing—although he did not deserve it. "I will not leave you until I have done that of which I have spoken to you" (28:15).

That night Jacob saw a ladder on which angels (messengers) ascended to the Lord and descended from heaven. In this dream "heaven" and "earth" were united, just as they will be fully and finally united through Christ (John 1:51). The whole creation will then be focused on the fulfillment of the promises made by God to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. "This is none other than the house of God, and this is the gate of heaven," declared an awe-struck Jacob (28:17). He named the place *Bethel* which means *house of God*.

This name comes up repeatedly in later Biblical history. In the days of King Jeroboam, the stone at Bethel which Jacob had anointed with oil was replaced by a holy place that competed with the temple in Jerusalem and was consecrated to the worship of the calf. Bethel, the house of God, became Beth-aven, the house of iniquity and lies (see Hos. 4:15; Amos 5:5).

*Leah and Rachel.* The prophet Hosea reports what happened to Jacob:

Jacob fled to the land of Aram,  
there Israel did service for a wife,  
and for a wife he herded sheep (Hos. 12:12).

The issue in the next stage of the drama is clearly the seed of the Church, the posterity of Jacob. Jacob fell in love with Rachel at first sight and offered to work for Laban to earn Rachel as his bride. But now the deceiver was sadly deceived. The one who was so eager to assume the rights of the first-born was given an unwanted woman as his bride—Leah, Laban’s first-born daughter. After a week went by, Jacob was also given Rachel as his wife, for whom he had to serve another seven years (29:28). These circumstances led to great competition and jealousy between the two wives of Jacob.

What happened afterwards represents an unsavory story. Jacob’s home was poisoned by jealousy and passion. Don’t forget that on the one hand the issue is one of *seed* or posterity, while on the other hand the Lord’s sovereign will was operative in this situation. The Lord wanted to make it clear that it is not human preference or beauty that makes a particular woman a mother of the Church.

Leah, who did not occupy the central place in her husband’s heart, bore child after child, while Jacob’s beloved Rachel remained childless. Eventually Rachel followed Sarah’s example—think of the story of Hagar—by giving Jacob her servant as a concubine so that she could have legal posterity through the children born of the servant. Leah, in turn, followed Rachel’s example.

After a long time, Rachel’s prayers were finally heard: Joseph was born of her own womb. Yet it is clear that Rachel did not have any “right” to special privileges for her children: Leah, who was spurned by Jacob, was favored by



God. It was Leah's son Judah who eventually received the Messianic promise.

God chooses what is weak in the world's eyes to put the strong to shame, so that no human being will be able to boast in the presence of God (I Cor. 1:27-9). Again we see that grace alone is the decisive factor.

The beginnings of the nation of Israel already proclaimed the grace that was to break through in Christ. To this day, Genesis continues to testify to the Jewish people that they must abandon any reliance on rights they claim in virtue of their national origin. Instead they must bow to the "offensive" sovereignty of God as revealed in the foolishness of the Word of the cross.

*Jacob and Laban.* In his relations with Laban, Jacob showed that he was still the same cunning character he had always been. He pretended to be meek and submissive, but he knew how to increase his possessions through all sorts of tricks (30:25ff). Finally he was forced to flee again. With the help of his wives, Jacob escaped from his uncle and father-in-law.

A certain dream played a role in his flight, but it is not clear whether Jacob reported the dream entirely accurately. In any case, the Lord commanded him to leave with his household. Laban pursued them and overtook them. There was an argument, but Jacob and Laban parted on amicable terms after making a covenant.

*Peniel.* Then Jacob began to fear an encounter with Esau. Jacob's household and possessions were threatened, for his brother was approaching with a large band of armed men. At this point mighty Jacob became like a small child. He prayed to the God of the covenant and appealed to the promises made: "Deliver me, I pray thee, from the hand of my brother. But thou didst say, 'I will do you good, and make your descendants as the sand of the sea,

which cannot be numbered for multitude' ” (32:11, 12).

After he had sent a generous present ahead to Esau and divided his household into two parties, Jacob remained behind at the Jabbok all alone. There he wrestled with a man whom he held on to until he received a blessing. The man then changed his name from *Jacob*, which reflects his constant struggle to get ahead, to *Israel* which means *ruling with God*.

This is not to say that the name *Jacob* disappears from the record after this point. We come across it repeatedly in later Bible books. In Isaiah the people of God are referred to interchangeably as Jacob or Israel (see Is. 48:1, 12, 17, 20). The Lord remains the God of Jacob (Ps. 146:5), but at the same time He is the God of Israel (Ps. 135:4).

Jacob had long wanted to win the blessing through weapons of the flesh, but now he had learned to fight with *spiritual* weapons. The angel of the Lord, with whom he had been wrestling, put his thigh permanently out of joint. Thus the promise would be inherited by a weakened Jacob.

Jacob named this place *Peniel*, which means *face of God*. He had seen God face to face—and survived. Hosea declares:

In his manhood he strove with God.  
He strove with the angel and prevailed,  
he wept and sought his favor (Hos. 12:3-4).

Again it's a question of grace. The Lord broke Jacob so that he would learn not to rely on the means of the flesh but would instead follow the way of faith and so become the lawful heir.

*Sin in Jacob's household.* We must not make the mistake of supposing that all sin was eliminated from the household of Jacob after Peniel. Once he had made his peace with Esau, Jacob did not go to Bethel to fulfill his promise. Instead he settled down in the vicinity of

Shechem. There he bought land and built an altar.

While he was living there, his family was subject to evil influences. His daughter Dinah was seduced by the son of the prince of the area. This led to a proposal that Jacob's family intermarry with the local people. This would at the same time enable Jacob and his sons to give up their alien status and become fully accepted citizens of the land in which they lived.

In a deceitful way, Jacob's sons went along with this proposal, making the circumcision of all males a condition of their agreement. Before the men of Shechem could recover from their circumcision, Simeon and Levi killed them and plundered the city to avenge Dinah's disgrace (ch. 34).

*From Bethel to Bethel.* This episode was the reason why the Lord commanded Jacob to go to Bethel and build an altar there. Jacob knew that he could not make this journey without preparation. First he would have to "overcome his old nature."

In his household there were still some idols (see 31:34ff). Jacob got rid of these foreign gods and put on different clothes for his solemn encounter with the God who had answered him in his hour of need and had accompanied him on his travels (35:1ff). When Jacob reached Bethel, he was granted a new revelation in which he was again given assurances about his inheritance and posterity. He was even told that *kings* would be born of his line.

The journey from Bethel to Bethel was a long one. Now the toledoth of Isaac can finally come to an end, for this journey is the real topic of these chapters in which Jacob's life is described.

These chapters show us how the Lord fulfilled His *promises to Isaac*. The old patriarch, who had to wait twenty years for children, lived long enough to witness the return of Jacob, who was by then the father of twelve sons

(35:27, 22). By that time Isaac had enough of life, and so he, too, died at Hebron, where his father Abraham had lived as a foreigner. In the cave at Machpelah he was buried by his two sons—Esau, who is mentioned first, and Jacob. The Lord had kept His promises.

## 11. The Toledoth of Esau (36—37:1)

*Esau's line.* When you first read this chapter, it might strike you as somewhat “dry.” What is it doing in the Bible?

Don't jump to any conclusions. It's entirely understandable that attention should here be focused on Esau's line. Wasn't Esau Isaac's first-born son? Furthermore, Esau and the Edomites descended from him played an important role in the history of Israel. The family of the Herods was descended from Esau. The Edomites rejoiced in the initial destruction of Jerusalem, and when there was later a rebellion against the Romans, they did their part to make the confusion in Jerusalem even greater.

Thus Esau is a figure of abiding interest. “ ‘Is not Esau Jacob's brother?’ says the LORD. ‘Yet I have loved Jacob, but I have hated Esau’ ” (Mal. 1:2; see also Rom. 9:13). The important thing is what God chooses to do as He determines the destinies of nations.

Genesis 36 is an important part of the Bible, then. We see God working out His purposes as Esau leaves Canaan, the land of the inheritance. At the same time we see that Esau is acting *freely*.

Esau was leaving the land where he had always been a *foreigner* (36:6-8). He married Canaanite women and thereby became related to the local people. He also married a daughter of Ishmael. Thus he went the way of Canaan and Egypt (see Lev. 18:3).

Esau broke with the land of the promise and chose a place to settle down permanently. It is clear from the genealogy that his children and descendants intermarried with the Horite people of Seir and mixed with them. This also meant that the covenant with God was forgotten more and more, and that the practice of circumcision fell into disuse.

*The Lord's promises to Esau.* On the other hand, we are struck by the fact that the Lord kept the promises made to Esau. Esau did indeed become a large nation. That nation had its own land and was ruled by its own king long before Israel's nation.

We can well understand how the blossoming of Esau's nation of Edom, like the blossoming of Ishmael's nation, must have put Israel to the test (36:31; see also I Sam. 8:5). Esau had kings and a land of its own (36:43) while Israel was still wandering around in the wilderness.

Yet, if God kept all His promises to Esau, Jacob could be all the more sure that the promises made to him would be kept as well! Even if the fulfillment didn't come right away, there was no reason for despair. Calvin points out that the flourishing of the Edomites did indeed make the Israelites look bad by comparison. But time taught the Israelites how much better it is to have a kingdom with roots deep in the earth than to shine for only a brief instant. Outside God's Kingdom there is no lasting glory. The glory of the Edomites was transitory; before long it was gone.

We read at the end of this toledoth that Jacob remained "in the land of his father's *sojournings*." These words are of *comfort* to us. Jacob's deed of believing obedience would lead to a blessing.

## 12. The Toledoth of Jacob (37:2—50:26)

*Church history.* The figure of Joseph is central in the history that follows. Don't forget that the issue is the toledoth of *Jacob* or *Israel*, that is, the genesis and growth of the Church. From then on the Church would be called Israel, the people of Jacob—even in the New Testament.

Therefore we may also call ourselves the *new Israel* and lay claim to the promises made to the patriarchs. Around the Lamb are gathered the 144,000 drawn from the twelve tribes of Israel (Rev. 7 and 14). The New Jerusalem bears the names of the twelve tribes on its gates (Rev. 21:12).

What follows, then, is *Church history*; it is prophecy containing comfort for *us*. The toledoth of Jacob continues right down to the present.

*The lingering spirit of Cain.* In the last fourteen chapters of Genesis, human sinfulness rears its ugly head again and again. If it had been up to the Church, salvation would never have dawned and the promise would remain unfulfilled.

There is something of the spirit of Cain in Jacob's tents. Canaan is intent on swallowing up the Church. Yet God is in control of all that is happening and so arranges things in His electing freedom that even famine or an attack made on a brother can serve to protect His Church and make it grow. God uses evil for the purpose of good so that a great nation would be preserved (50:20).

At the end there is the prospect of the promised land. Dying Joseph declares: "God will visit you, and bring you up out of the land to the land which he swore to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob" (50:24). Thus these chapters of Genesis should not be read as an entertaining novel under the title *From Slave to King*. Rather, they tell us what God chooses to do *in spite of* the sin of the Church.

*Brother against brother.* The composition of Jacob's family made it unlikely that the twelve brothers would all get along well together. Jacob's love for Rachel led to a special love for her son Joseph, to whom he gave a beautiful garment, a long robe with sleeves.

Joseph made use of his special position to keep his father informed about the misdeeds of his brothers. Furthermore, to his brothers he reported dreams in which he appeared as ruling over them. This made his brothers hate him so much that they wanted to kill him.

The opportunity presented itself one day when they were far from home. Reuben, the oldest of the sons, wanted to spare Joseph by throwing him into a pit. (He planned to return alone later and rescue him.) But at Judah's suggestion, Joseph was sold to some merchants, who brought the "dreamer" to Egypt and in turn sold him to the captain of Pharaoh's guard (ch. 37). Jacob was shown Joseph's robe dipped in goat's blood as evidence that he had been killed by a wild beast.

*Judah's family.* Before the story of Joseph is continued, we are told a few things about Judah and his family. This, too, fits under the heading of the toledoth of Jacob. Princes were to be born of Judah's line—and ultimately the Messiah. Yet we must not make the mistake of supposing that this honor paid to Judah's line is a consequence of any noble behavior on the part of Judah himself. Again we see that God goes ahead with His plans *in spite of* man's sin.

Judah drifted away from his brothers and mingled with the Canaanites through marriage. His son also took a Canaanite woman as his wife. Soon the Canaanite spirit, a spirit that perverted sexual life, gained the upper hand in his family. The Bible speaks about this matter in a straightforward, honest way. Because sexuality is a gift of God, sexual sins must be exposed clearly for what they are.

Things finally went so far that Judah refused to give his

daughter-in-law Tamar (whose name means *palm tree*) to his son Shelah in marriage after she remained childless in her marriage to his older son, who had left her a widow. Tamar eventually tricked Judah into having sexual relations with her. Judah, who had mistaken her for a prostitute, then became the father of her twins. Ultimately the deceived Judah had to admit that Tamar was more in the right than he was in this sorry episode.

This might sound strange in the light of what Tamar had done, but we must bear in mind that her actions manifested a strong desire for “seed” or posterity, a desire that represented a response to the promise. Tamar is mentioned in Matthew 1 in the genealogy of Jesus Christ.

*Joseph’s elevation in Egypt.* Sharply contrasted with Judah’s shameful behavior is the conduct of Joseph in the house of Potiphar. Joseph’s uprightness led to his imprisonment. His life was full of ups and downs.

Because of his ability to interpret dreams, he was presented to the Pharaoh, who was having difficulty finding out what two of his dreams meant (ch. 40). Joseph, who had been hauled out of prison for the occasion, asked God for help. He was then able to inform Pharaoh that there was a long famine ahead. He also told him what had to be done to prepare for it. Pharaoh was impressed and elevated Joseph to the position of ruler over all the land of Egypt (ch. 40-41).

The Egyptian kings were usually very generous when it came to bestowing honors on someone they favored. Thus the 30-year-old Joseph enjoyed a number of honors. In addition to the Egyptian name *Zaphenath-paneah* (which includes the Egyptian word for life), he was made the keeper of the royal seal (41:42), a father to Pharaoh (45:8), the lord of Pharaoh’s house and ruler over all the land of Egypt (41:40; 45:8), and ruler over both upper and lower Egypt (41:41; 45:8).



This does not necessarily mean that Joseph was the only such ruler. Such titles were bestowed on various highly placed officials. Joseph was only one of these officials, but he did have a special task: he was commissioned to be the overseer of Pharaoh's stores of grain (41:34, 40, 43, 56; 42:6). We could say that Pharaoh made Joseph one of his ministers and gave him complete authority and responsibility in the area of food supplies.

It is clear from various excavations that powerful Egyptians were often given a number of titles by the kings, either as a favor or as a way of emphasizing the great responsibilities they bore. In the light of discoveries that have been made, it now appears that the honors conferred on Joseph were not unique.

Why was the royal family of Egypt so friendly to Joseph and later to his family as well? Perhaps it was because both families were Asiatic in origin. Later the friendliness disappeared, when there was a new dynasty made up of people who had not known Joseph (Ex. 1:8).

Interpreters and preachers have often made Joseph a "type" of Christ in that he was humiliated and later exalted, thereby applying allegorical methods to the story of Joseph. They point out that Joseph was imprisoned with two men (the butler and the baker), just as Christ was crucified with two men (the penitent thief and the one who refused to believe). However, any speculation that turns sinful human beings into "types" must be rejected: at most we can speak of a typological connection between the *suffering* of the righteous and the *suffering* of Christ, who fulfilled all the prophecies.

*Joseph revealed to his brothers.* When the famine predicted by Joseph finally came, Jacob sent his sons to Egypt to buy grain, but he kept Benjamin at home. Joseph's mysterious encounter with the brothers who had sold him into slavery is described for us in a vivid way. The

lost brother cast a long shadow: the brothers told Joseph, whom they did not recognize, that one of their number was no longer alive (42:13). The nomadic visitors seemed unsure of themselves at court; there was no disguising their confusion and awkwardness. Joseph forced Simeon to remain behind and told the brothers that the next time they came they were to bring along Benjamin, who was still very young when Joseph was sold into slavery.

When the famine in Canaan finally forced them to return—as foreigners, Jacob and his family could not expect to be included in the grain rationing in Canaan—Joseph put them to the test by arresting Benjamin on some false charges (44:11-13). Would they now give up another son of Rachel?

From the mouth of Judah, who had taken the initiative in selling Joseph into slavery, we now hear a confession of guilt (44:16). Judah had guaranteed Benjamin's safety to his anxious father before the departure from Canaan (43:9; 44:32). He made good his promise by saying to Joseph: "Now therefore, let your servant, I pray you, remain instead of the lad as a slave to my lord; and let the lad go back with his brothers" (44:33).

Once Joseph saw that there was genuine *sorrow* about the sin committed against him earlier, he revealed his identity. And because the famine was far from over, he invited his entire family to come and live in Egypt (ch. 45).

*Jacob in Egypt.* At the end of the book of Genesis we see Jacob, who was an old man by this time, preparing himself for still another journey. In Beersheba, where Abraham had once built an altar and Isaac had also sacrificed, he made an offering to the Lord. The Lord appeared to him again—this time on the *border* of Canaan! He was given the sure promise that Yahweh would be with him (and his posterity) and would bring him back someday to the land of promise (46:1-4).

The 70 people of Jacob's family who came to Egypt settled down in the land of Goshen. Because of the measures Joseph had taken to prepare for the famine, they were well provided for (ch. 46-47).

Settling down in Egypt was *necessary* for the continued existence of Israel. From the history of Judah's house and the events at Shechem, it was clear that the "holy seed" would not survive in the long run in the face of Canaanite temptations. The lure of worshiping blood and the land, Baal and Astarte, was too strong.

The point of these chapters in Genesis is not to give us the story of a man who was once a shepherd boy, then was sold into slavery, and ultimately became a high government official responsible for dealing with the famine. No, what we are shown here is that Yahweh protects His people and abides by His promises.

*Prophetic blessings.* That's why the book of Genesis ends with prophetic blessings in which we are given a glimpse of what is to come. First Jacob blesses the two sons of Joseph, whom he accepts as his own sons (48:5), although Reuben and Simeon were in fact his first-born sons. Jacob begins by mentioning the promise made to him at Bethel, and he also remembers the death of Rachel at Ephrath, i.e. Bethlehem (48:3-7; see also 35:16-20).

When Jacob blesses the two sons of Joseph, we are given another striking example of the law of election at work: Ephraim, the younger brother, is given the blessing normally reserved for the first-born (48:13-20). Jacob's faith is strong as he formulates the patriarchal blessing:

The God before whom my fathers Abraham and Isaac  
walked,  
the God who has led me all my life long to this day,  
the angel who has redeemed me from all evil, bless the lads;  
and in them let my name be perpetuated, and the name of  
my fathers Abraham and Isaac;

and let them grow into a multitude in the midst of the earth (48:15-16).

Jacob concludes by speaking of the *land*. Thus there was no doubt in his mind about the promise of the land. Later in the Bible we read: “By faith Jacob, when dying, blessed each of the sons of Joseph, bowing in worship over the head of his staff” (Heb. 11:21).

*The promise to Judah.* When Jacob spoke his final words to all his sons, his prophetic faith did not desert him. Here again we must focus our attention on the sovereign choices made by God. The blessing was not given to Reuben, the first-born son. Nor did Simeon or Levi receive the blessing of the first-born. It was *Judah*, whose record was far from clean, who was told: “Your brothers shall praise you.” Reuben, who had once had sexual relations with his own father’s concubine (35:22), would not be first among the brothers, nor would Simeon or Levi, who were carried away at Shechem by their lust for revenge (ch. 34).

It was Judah who received the royal promise. In the King James Version we read that the scepter would not depart from him “until Shiloh come.” (This reference to “Shiloh” is listed as an alternate reading in the Revised Standard Version.) “Shiloh” is to take over the power in this world once and for all, but it is not clear just what the name itself means. Does it mean *rest*, or *peace*, or *justice*, or perhaps *dominion*? In any event, it is a definite reference to the Messiah. The Messiah is the “Lion of the tribe of Judah” (Rev. 5:5).

The lion motif is still to be found in synagogues today. Yet this promise was already realized in Christ, who brought the paradisaical glory of which Jacob prophesied (49:11-12; Rev. 19:13, 15). The Messiah was the one who would bring the Messianic deliverance for which Jacob waited (49:18).

In the prophecies about the other sons, we are given a

sketch of the later destinies of the tribes. Zebulun did in fact come to live in the far north by the sea, and the mighty judge Samson did indeed stem from the tribe of Dan (49:13, 16-17). Joseph's territory, in what was later called Samaria, did turn out to be very fruitful, just as Jacob had prophesied (49:22ff).

We should note that comparisons are made with plants and animals. (Yet, we can speak of "totem animals" here only in a secondary, comparative sense.) The creation is subordinated to God's Word of blessing over the tribes and nations. We must not contrast "natural" blessings with "spiritual" blessings. God's gifts are one: nature is not to be separated from grace.

*Jacob's death.* After speaking these words rich in promise, Jacob gave the command that he was to be buried in the old cave at Machpelah. His sons obeyed this order. At the end of Genesis, then, our attention is once more directed toward Canaan.

Even Joseph, whose brothers once more asked for forgiveness after Jacob's death, gave orders that his bones were to be carried along to the promised land when the time of the exodus came. Joseph told his brothers: "God will visit you, and bring you out of this land to the land which he swore to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob" (50:21, 24-5). God keeps His Word faithfully!

*The God of Genesis.* The ten toledoths of Genesis have shown us how the electing God of the covenant used the doctrine of a Messianic future to hold on to His Church in the midst of life's difficulties. In Hebrews we read:

These all died in faith, not having received what was promised, but having seen it and greeted it from afar, and having acknowledged that they were strangers and exiles on the earth. Therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God, for he has prepared for them a *city* (Heb. 11:13, 16).

The God of Genesis is the God who will lead us into the new Paradise and the New Jerusalem. “Happy is he whose help is the God of Jacob” (Ps. 146:5).

# Exodus

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## 1. The Book of Israel's First Deliverance

*A departure.* We now turn our attention to Exodus, the second book of the Bible. Of course we will focus only on the main lines, for we must not lose sight of the forest as we look at all the trees.

As children of the new covenant, we should be comforted and strengthened by our reading of Exodus. It has been argued that Exodus was used by the early Christian church as the basis for its program of instruction. This should not surprise us, for careful examination reveals that there are a great many connections between Exodus and the New Testament.

*Exodus* means a *departure*, a *going out*. It is no coincidence that Moses and Elijah spoke to Jesus of His "departure" for Jerusalem when they appeared on the Mount of Transfiguration (Luke 9:31). The blood of the *Passover Lamb* played an important role in the deliverance from Egypt. The Passover was then established as a festival to celebrate and commemorate Israel's great

deliverance from the house of bondage in Egypt. How is this reflected in the New Testament?

*Christ as our Passover Lamb.* Christ is the ultimate Passover Lamb, the Lamb of God that takes away the sins of the world (John 1:29, 36). Paul, too, points to Christ as our Passover Lamb (I Cor. 5:7).

Christ died at the time of the Passover festival. He was like a Passover lamb in that He died without any of His bones being broken. Peter declares that we are ransomed “not with perishable things such as silver or gold, but with the precious blood of Christ, like that of a lamb without blemish or spot” (I Pet. 1:18-19).

*The blood of the covenant.* There are still more connections between Exodus and the New Testament. Exodus tells us of the sealing of the covenant at Mount Sinai. This ceremony involved *blood*. “Behold the blood of the covenant,” Moses declared (24:8).

When Paul tells us how Christ instituted the Lord’s supper, he reports that Jesus pointed to the *first* covenant by way of the words He chose. He picked up the cup and said, “This cup is the *new* covenant in my blood.”

Christ’s mission on earth was directly bound up with the history of the covenant people in the Old Testament. He Himself emphasized this by referring often to the Old Testament. Furthermore, the letters in the New Testament (e.g. Hebrews) assure us repeatedly that Christ has brought the redemptive history of the Old Testament to a climax. Through His blood, He instituted a new covenant.

*Provisional deliverance.* From this point of view it quickly becomes apparent that what we read about in Exodus is the provisional deliverance of the people of God, the Church. In the light of the revelation that came later, we must read Exodus in the awareness that all was fulfilled



in Christ. What we read in the second book of the Bible has to do with the deliverance of the Church—then and now.

At the Passover meal, Jews today still declare: “We were Pharaoh’s slaves in Egypt, and the Lord our God brought us forth from there with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm.” He brought *us* forth! Thus the Jews are well aware that the deliverance from Egypt involves them personally. Because ancient Israel lives on in the Church today (the new Israel), we may also declare: “We were slaves in the land of Egypt, and the Lord brought *us* forth with His mighty hand.”

*Exodus themes in Revelation.* When you read the book of Revelation, you find that it contains a great deal that initially strikes you as strange. But if you are familiar with the book of Exodus, you will immediately sense how much Revelation draws on Exodus.

Jesus Christ (the Lamb) is central to the book of Revelation. The woman (the Church) is fed in the wilderness, just as Israel was fed for 40 years in the desolate wilderness (Rev. 12). By the sea of glass the song of Moses is sung, just as the children of Israel sang on the bank of the Red Sea after Pharaoh and his armies drowned in the swirling waters. Furthermore, the plagues in Revelation bear a strong resemblance to the plagues with which the tormented king of Egypt was afflicted: compare what we read in Revelation 8, 9 and 16 with the story of the ten plagues as recorded in Exodus.

*Exodus and our own destiny.* I have pointed to these connections with the New Testament before going into Exodus itself in order to make a certain point: at stake in the events recorded in this book is our own destiny. Exodus is not an account of the history of some foreign nation in which we have a passing interest. If we were to

study the history of Tibet, for example, we might well find it interesting. Yet, if we are North Americans or Africans, Tibet's history does not affect us directly. In a certain sense this could even be said of the history of our own country. The deeds of all those strange forefathers do not always concern us.

But this should not be our attitude toward Biblical history. The toledoth of heaven and earth must be read as the history of "our" heaven and earth. The "births" of Adam give us the history of *our* ancestors—something that should concern us intensely. This is also true of Israel's exodus from Egypt and the covenant made with the Lord. The ultimate issue is *our* deliverance from the house of bondage and *our* covenant with the Lord.

*He sent Moses his servant, and  
Aaron whom he had chosen  
(Ps. 105:26).*

## **2. The Struggle Begins**

*Israel's future leader.* We read first of the difficult position of the Israelites in Egypt. As a minority, these "displaced persons" were severely oppressed. But the Lord raised up a deliverer—Moses.

If there is one thing made clear to us in Exodus, it is that *all salvation* comes from the Lord. Again and again man's plans collapse—but the Lord opens new doors!

The emergence of Moses as Israel's leader illustrates this. His life hung by a slender thread. Although his parents had devised a clever plan to spare his life in the face of Pharaoh's edict that all male babies born to the Israelites were to be put to death, it was really the Lord who made the plan succeed. In Exodus 2 we read the story of Moses in his basket of bullrushes, which was in effect a little ark.

When Moses receives a position at the court and is in-

structed in all sorts of wisdom, the Lord is preparing him for the task he is later to be given. But he will carry out his assignment only when *God* says it is time. Moses makes a premature attempt to become the deliverer of his people (2:11ff), but he fails and is forced to flee. His own people do not trust him (Acts 7:23-9, 35).

Moses goes to Midian to live and marries a daughter of the priest Jethro. He remains there for 40 years as a shepherd in the wilderness. This, too, is a preparation for the office he is later to assume.

*The burning bush.* The Lord appeared to Moses in a burning bush when he was looking after the flocks at Horeb, the southern end of the Sinai peninsula. He reminded Moses of the promise made to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob (3:6, 15; see also 6:2-7). He explained that He had now “come down” to deliver Israel from the hand of the Egyptian oppressors and would lead Israel to Canaan. Moses was to be the means by which the Lord led Israel out of Egypt.

What was Moses’ response to this good news? He used all the excuses he could think of to escape his assignment. He raised all sorts of objections and questions.

His first objection was: Who am I? In other words, Moses was afraid he would not be up to such a task. The Lord responded by declaring: “But I will be with you; and this shall be the sign for you, that I have sent you: when you have brought forth the people out of Egypt, you shall serve God upon this mountain” (3:12).

*God’s covenant name.* Moses’ second question was: Who are You? In other words: What is Your name? What sort of God are You? God’s answer was: “I AM WHO I AM.” Moses was to say to the children of Israel: “I AM has sent me to you.” By virtue of this declaration by God, the Israelites are permitted to call Him YHWH, i.e. Yahweh

(spelled *Jehovah* in some translations), which means *HE IS*.

This name refers not to the Lord's eternity but to His being *with Israel*, His presence as a bringer of blessing or punishment. What the name teaches us is that God is faithful. He does not change, but keeps all the promises made to the patriarchs. Thus Moses was simply to make his mission known to the elders of Israel and to the Pharaoh.

*An unwilling freedom fighter.* Moses argued thirdly that the people would not believe him. God responded to this objection by giving Moses the power to do wonders. Moses then presented his fourth argument, namely, that he lacked the eloquence and rhetorical abilities for such a task. The Lord answered by saying, "I will be with your mouth and teach you what you shall speak" (4:12). Finally, Moses begged God to send someone else instead. God responded by telling Moses that his brother Aaron would do the talking for him.

Thus you can see that Israel has no right whatsoever to depict Moses as a hero of superhuman proportions who drew on his immense abilities and dynamic personality to lead Israel out of bondage in Egypt. Here, as elsewhere, the Bible is painfully honest in showing us the weaknesses and shortcomings of its central figures. Even in the very presence of God, Moses dared to offer one excuse after the other. It was against his will, then, that he became a freedom fighter. There is no room for boasting, as Paul was to put it later (Rom. 3:27).

*An unwilling people.* But what about the Israelites? Moses was already afraid they would not listen to him. When Moses and Aaron made an attempt to free them, it quickly became apparent that the people did not possess the gift of perseverance (see Ex. 5).

Moses and Aaron asked Pharaoh's permission for the

people of Israel to go out into the wilderness to hold a feast to Yahweh. Although they had said nothing about a full liberation of Israel, Pharaoh responded harshly by increasing the burden the Israelites had to bear. Pharaoh is an Old Testament Herod; he represents the seed of the serpent, which seeks to kill the seed of the woman.

Now that the attempt at liberation had failed, the Israelite leaders complained to Moses and Aaron that they had only provided Pharaoh with a sword to kill the Israelites. It appeared that the prophet Moses was not being honored in his own land. That's how it has always gone with the prophets: they are rejected by their own people. We will see another example of this when we study Jeremiah. And we all know how Christ was rejected by His own people.

*No room for boasting.* No, the Israelites had no right to point to themselves and declare proudly that they had *freed themselves* from the Egyptian yoke! Again and again there was opposition to the leadership of Moses—even after the Israelites had left Egypt. There was scarcely any respite from the grumbling and complaining. Even before they reached the Red Sea, the tiresome refrain began: “Is it because there are no graves in Egypt that you have taken us away to die in the wilderness?” (14:11). As long as the Israelites were in the wilderness, the complaining continued. You can easily find your own examples by paging through Exodus.

It was *the Lord* who led His people out of Egypt. He acted out of sovereign love, for Israel did not deserve such treatment. “Not because of your righteousness or the uprightness of your heart are you going in to possess their land.” God would give Israel the land of Canaan “that he may confirm the word which the LORD swore to your

fathers, to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob” (Deut. 9:5-6). Once more we see that there is no room for boasting.

*A further revelation.* Before we go further and examine the ten plagues and the destruction of Pharaoh’s army in the Red Sea, we must focus our attention on the revelation recorded for us in the sixth chapter of Exodus, where we find some words that are liable to be misunderstood. In this chapter the Lord reveals Himself anew to Moses, who has just suffered a defeat at the hands of Pharaoh. He refers to Himself by the name *LORD* (Yahweh) and declares: “I appeared to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob, as God Almighty [Hebrew: *El Shaddai*], but by my name the LORD [*Yahweh*] I did not make myself known to them” (vs. 3).

As we read this, we ask ourselves: “What is that supposed to mean?” Much earlier in the Bible we read that men already began to call on the name of the LORD in the days of Seth (Gen. 4:26), and that Abram also did so (Gen. 12:8). Could the name *Yahweh* have been unknown in earlier times?

Of course not. But when this passage in Exodus speaks of God’s “name,” the word *name* refers to a revelation of an essence. *Yahweh* was certainly known to Moses as a *word*, for his mother’s name (*Jochebed*) was closely related to it. The *word* was already known, then, but God would now show that He *was* and *is Yahweh*, that is, the one who is faithful and unchanging. Think of what Jesus once said when He prayed not just as High Priest but also as King and Prophet: “I have manifested thy name to the men whom thou gavest me out of the world” (John 17:6).

*More objections.* In Exodus 6 we again see Moses raising objections, arguing that he is “of uncircumcised lips” (vs. 12, 30). And when Moses brings the Israelites his message

of exodus from Egypt and entry into Canaan, the dispirited people, dejected by all the additional drudgery imposed on them, refuse to listen. Yet the Lord goes right on *encouraging* Moses. Moses must seek another audience with Pharaoh and negotiate with him further. Pharaoh's heart will be hardened, but the Lord will strike Egypt with great wonders and judgments so that Israel will finally be able to depart.

*When I see the blood, I will pass over you . . . (12:13).*

### **3. Deliverance through Divine Judgment**

*Nine plagues.* Aaron prepared Pharaoh for what was to come by performing a miracle at the court: he turned his staff into a serpent. Pharaoh's magicians were able to duplicate this feat, but Aaron's serpent devoured the other serpents. This was certainly a suitable sign for Egyptians, since serpents always played a large role in their thinking.

When this sign failed to change Pharaoh's mind, the ten successive plagues struck the entire Egyptian nation. We can see a certain *intensification* in these plagues. The first two plagues could be duplicated by the Egyptian magicians, but not the later ones (8:18-19). It appeared that Yahweh was more powerful than Egypt's gods. The plagues as a whole must be viewed as a judgment on those gods (12:12; Num. 33:4).

We see further that the Lord made the judgment more severe with each plague. But Pharaoh became ever more stubborn as he hardened his heart. Repeatedly Moses had to pray for an end to the plagues. A few times Pharaoh admitted that he had been wrong and agreed to let the

people go under certain conditions. But once the plague stopped, he changed his mind. Not even the fact that the Israelites were spared some of the plagues made an impression on him. He hardened his heart—and the Lord hardened his heart.

*The tenth plague.* Finally the last plague came. The Lord had told Moses to say to Pharaoh: “Thus says the LORD, Israel is *my first-born son*, and I say to you, ‘Let *my son* go, that he may serve me’; if you refuse to let him go, behold, I will slay *your first-born son*” (4:22-3). This gives us a proper understanding of the tenth plague. Pharaoh’s offense was against Israel, the *son* of God. Elsewhere in Scripture God declared: “Out of Egypt I called *my son*” (Hos. 11:1). Because the Egyptians would not let God’s first-born son go, they would have to *mourn* their own first-born sons.

This last plague did not strike Israel, the first-born son. But we should not say, “Of course not!” If Israel was called the son of God, it was only because of God’s *gracious* willingness to forgive sins. If the Lord were to bring His people into court, it would quickly become apparent that Israel also deserved to be struck by the most horrible plagues.

*The Passover.* To symbolize this, the Lord established the Passover—in commemoration of the time when He “passed over” the Israelites. In each household, the father was ordered to sacrifice a lamb (or a young goat). The lamb would have to be a male, about one year old and without any flaws or blemishes. After it was slaughtered, some of its blood would be spread on the doorposts and the lintel of the house. On a certain night, the Lord would then come to Egypt to kill the first-born sons. “When I see the blood, I will pass over you” (12:13). We are reminded of the occasion when a young ram was



sacrificed in Isaac's place. In both instances, reconciliation was achieved by substituting some other blood.

The Lord then decreed that this Passover ceremony was to be repeated each year on a certain date (the fourteenth day of the month of Nisan). Just as the Reformed churches recognize baptism and communion as the two sacraments sealing Christ's redemptive work, Israel had the "sacraments" of circumcision and the Passover. The Israelites were to eat their Passover lamb together with some biscuits made without yeast as a way of remembering their hasty departure from Egypt. To this day, the unleavened bread eaten by Jews is still being sold (under the name *matzah*). There was to be no yeast in this bread because yeast or leaven was a symbol for sin (see Luke 12:1; Mark 8:15; and Matt. 16:11). Paul declares that Christ is the Passover Lamb slaughtered for our sakes and therefore demands that we do away with the old leaven—malice and evil (I Cor. 5:7-8).

Each year the Israelites were to celebrate the Passover, so that the great deeds of God would not be forgotten. The feast was to last seven days. (Seven is a holy number.) The father, whose task it was to serve as priest in this celebration, would explain the meaning of the feast (see 12:26-7; 13:8-10). When the Jews of our time celebrate the Passover, it is their custom to have one of the children ask a series of questions which are then answered by the father. Through its Passover tradition, Israel obeyed the command to keep the memory of the exodus alive. What the Jews of our time fail to see is that *Christ* is the Passover Lamb who washes away the sins of the world in His blood.

*The consecration of the first-born.* Before we discuss the exodus further, we must focus our attention on one other command. The Passover feast was not the only means used by the Lord to make the Israelites understand that they were to live solely by God's free grace. He gave an additional command intended to make them aware of this:

the first-born among men and domestic animals—if they were males—would have to be consecrated to the Lord.

In the case of animals, this meant that the first-born would have to be sacrificed. If the animal in question was a donkey, a lamb could be offered in its place. If the donkey itself was sacrificed—donkeys were not normally used for sacrifices—its neck would have to be broken. The horse, which was not an animal used for sacrifice either, posed no problem, for the Israelites had no horses.

What about the first-born human beings? Did they have to be sacrificed too? No, a payment could be made for them instead. Actually, the first-born sons were to be consecrated to the Lord either as a sacrifice or as servants in the sanctuary. Yet, through the payment of a certain sum of money, they could be freed of this obligation.

Later the Lord designated the tribe of Levi to serve Him in the temple in place of the first-born. “Behold, I have taken the Levites from among the people of Israel instead of every first-born that opens the womb among the people of Israel. The Levites shall be mine, for all the first-born are mine” (Num. 3:12-13).

No doubt you’re familiar with the story of the presentation of Jesus in the temple (Luke 2:22-4). Rembrandt made a famous painting of this scene. Many people believe that the ceremony performed on this occasion was Jesus’ circumcision. But that’s not the case; the circumcision had already taken place on the eighth day after His birth. No, on this occasion in the temple Mary was bringing an offering for her purification. At the same time, five shekels were paid to free Jesus, as the *first-born*, from the duty of serving in the temple.

Christ was freed from serving as a priest in the order of *Aaron*, so that He could become a priest after the order of *Melchizedek*. It’s an interesting thought that the one who came to pay for our sins, the one who bought us, first had to pay a certain sum of money to be freed of duty in the earthly temple.

*Salvation and obedience.* Unfortunately, the Israelites did not always understand the purpose of all these decrees in which the Lord demonstrated His grace. They faithfully celebrated the Passover and abided by all the laws connected with it. But they made the mistake of supposing that their salvation could be based on their obedience to these laws. Thereby they lost sight of the meaning of the Passover. It was Christ who restored the meaning of the Passover.

There is no room for boasting on our part, then, for salvation comes to us as a gracious and undeserved gift from God. If we must boast, let us boast of God's grace so freely bestowed on us. Praise the Lord, who redeems your life from the Pit!

*Yet God my King is from of old  
(Ps. 74:12).*

#### **4. Across the Red Sea and the Wilderness**

*Complete liberation from bondage.* God's way is not always the shortest way. The Israelites found this out when they left Egypt. Pharaoh had finally let them go. But they did not proceed directly to Canaan, the land of promise. To avoid a struggle with other nations in the vicinity, they went in the direction of the Red Sea (also called the Sea of Reeds).

They were equipped for what lay ahead, and they had the bones of Joseph with them (13:17-19). The Lord went before them like a shepherd, in a pillar of cloud by day and a pillar of fire by night.

Despite the Lord's presence, the Israelites soon got into difficulties. They were encamped between the sea on the one side and the wilderness on the other. Pharaoh heard

about this and seized on it as an opportunity to force his runaway slaves to return.

It was a horrible moment for the Israelites when they caught sight of Pharaoh approaching with his army. But at this juncture the Lord demonstrated His faithfulness and rescued His people. He told Moses to stretch out his staff over the sea. An east wind opened a path through which the Israelites could cross the sea, with Pharaoh and his soldiers right behind them.

The chariots of the Egyptians got stuck in the sand. The pillar of cloud then came between the Israelites and the Egyptians. Yahweh was fighting on Israel's side! Thanks to His help, the Israelites reached the other side in safety. Moses again stretched out his staff over the sea. The water rushed back, and Pharaoh and his soldiers drowned.

The Israelites were now free of Pharaoh once and for all and would not have to return to Egypt after celebrating their festival in the wilderness. The drowning of Pharaoh sealed Israel's complete liberation from the house of bondage in Egypt. The Lord had given a demonstration of His kingly power.

*The song of Moses.* Israel's deliverance from Pharaoh's army became the occasion for a joyful song sung by Miriam, the sister of Moses. Moses himself also broke into song:

I will sing to the LORD,  
for he has triumphed gloriously;  
the horse and his rider  
he has thrown into the sea (15:1).

Moses concluded his song with the words: "The LORD will *reign* for ever and ever" (15:18). We could also translate these words: "The LORD is *King* for ever and ever." The latter translation brings out the idea of the *kingship of Yahweh* more clearly.

The conclusion of Moses' song is important because the thought expressed in it was a prevalent theme in Israel's songs of praise. The amazing revelation of the kingship of Yahweh, the God of Israel, began with the wonders of Egypt and the exodus through the Red Sea.

This song of Moses could therefore be continued when songs were needed later for services in the temple. Think of the so-called royal psalms, i.e. 93, 95-99. There we read repeatedly that the Lord rules, that He is King. These declarations echo the song of Moses.\*

*The basis of Israel's hope.* The exodus from Egypt by way of the Red Sea was fundamental to Israel's hope for the future. The God who turned the sea into dry land would rule forever (Ps. 66). The deliverance in the exodus story was an abiding comfort to Israel. Surely the Lord could deliver Israel again!

Much later, when the Israelites were in exile, they sang:

Awake, awake, put on strength,  
O arm of the Lord;  
awake, as in days of old,  
the generations of long ago.  
Was it not thou that didst cut Rahab [i.e. Egypt] in pieces,  
that didst pierce the dragon?  
Was it not thou that didst dry up the sea,  
the waters of the great deep;  
that didst make the depths of the sea a way  
for the redeemed to pass over?  
And the ransomed of the Lord shall return,  
and come to Zion with singing (Is. 51:9-11).

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\*Gispen's commentary on Exodus in the "Korte Verklaring" series lists some of these passages: *verse 1* (Ps. 66:6; 68:18; 106:12), *verse 2* (Ps. 118:14, 21, 28), *verse 3* (Ps. 24:8), *verse 4* (Ps. 136:15), *verses 5-17* (Ps. 78:52-4), *verses 5-13* (Ps. 77:14-20), *verses 5-16* (Ps. 106:11), *verse 7* (Ps. 78:49), *verse 8* (Ps. 78:13), *verse 11* (Ps. 66:3, 5; 78:4, 12; 86:8), *verses 13-17* (Ps. 44:2, 4; 74:2), *verse 17* (Ps. 80:9, 16), *verse 18* (Ps. 146:10).

Thus the exiles in Babylon proclaimed the gospel of the exodus: your God is King (see Is. 52:7).

*Baptism and the Red Sea.* These words are reminiscent of the prayers that often precede baptism. In Luther's prayer book of 1523, Israel's dramatic deliverance at the Red Sea is mentioned explicitly in connection with baptism: "And drowned the unrepentant Pharaoh and all his men in the Red Sea, and led Your people Israel through the sea on dry ground, so that in future this would signify Your holy baptism . . . ."

How is it that this connection is made in a baptismal prayer? Paul writes that our fathers were all "baptized into Moses in the cloud and in the sea" (I Cor. 10:2). The waters opened a path for the Church and at the same time swallowed up its anti-Christian enemies. Thus baptism in Christ, the Mediator of the new covenant, is a sign of the washing away of sins and the exodus through which we are saved.

The important point, which is taught both by Israel's history and I Corinthians 10, is that we must fix our hopes solely on the God of this baptism. We must not forget that although the Israelites were "baptized" and ate manna in the wilderness, almost all of them perished on the way to Canaan because of their murmuring. Only those who persevere will stand on the shore of the sea of glass, singing the song of Moses and the Lamb:

How great and wonderful are all your works,  
Lord God Almighty;  
just and true are all your ways,  
*King of nations* (Rev. 15:3 JB).

*Learning to live by grace.* The primary purpose of the wilderness journey is well known—*Sinai*. But another purpose was to teach the Israelites to *live by grace*. The wilderness was just the place to learn this, for there they

would be without the usual comforts. The Lord would put His people to the test to make them humble and to see whether they were willing to live *by His Word alone*.

The Lord made His intentions known in no uncertain terms: “If you will diligently hearken to the voice of the LORD your God, and do that which is right in his eyes, and give heed to his commandments and keep all his statutes, I will put none of the diseases upon you which I put upon the Egyptians; for I am the LORD, your healer” (15:26). Keep these words in mind as you read about Israel’s ups and downs, such as Marah (15:23), the sending of the manna (ch. 16), Massah and Meribah (17:1-7), the struggle against Amalek (17:8-16), and the events at Sinai when the law was given. Think also of the events described in Numbers 11, 13-14, and 16.

Again and again it became apparent that the Israelites did *not* want to live by grace. Instead, they rebelled against the fatherly leading of Yahweh and refused to recognize Him as King and Healer.

*A prefiguration of Christ.* To make sure we do not lose sight of the connections between Exodus and other parts of the Bible, I must say more about the manna and about Amalek. Christ turned a small amount of bread into a great deal of bread, just as the prophet Elisha had done earlier (II Kings 4:42-4). But this miracle was not enough for the Jews who wanted a sign. After they had eaten, they said thoughtlessly: “Then what sign do you do, that we may see, and believe you? What work do you perform? Our fathers ate the manna in the wilderness; as it is written, ‘He gave them bread *from heaven* to eat’ ” (John 6:30-1). In other words, if Christ would only give a sign along the lines of Moses’ signs, they would believe in Him.

Christ answered this brutal request for a sign, for a piece of irrefutable proof, by telling them that the Father gives the true bread from heaven. “Your fathers ate the manna in

the wilderness, and they died. *I am the living bread which came down from heaven*" (John 6:32, 48-51). Here Christ proclaimed Himself to be greater than Moses and promised that anyone who ate the bread of which He spoke would live forever. The manna in the wilderness was a prophecy pointing to the work of Christ. Hence Paul declares that the Israelites ate Spiritual food in the wilderness (I Cor. 10:3).

*The Amalekites.* What about the Amalekites? This nomadic tribe attacked Israel from the rear. When Moses made an appeal to God's amazing power by holding out his staff, the Israelites fighting under Joshua's command won the battle. The hand (of Moses and Israel) was on the throne of the Lord, who helps His people and will continue to help them! (17:8-16). Because the Amalekites had behaved so treacherously, the Lord told Moses to record what had happened—he must have been keeping a diary of some sort—so that Joshua and the coming generations would not forget to make war against Amalek relentlessly (see Deut. 25:17-19).

Later Saul and David had to defend themselves against this nomadic tribe (I Sam. 15; 27:8; 30; II Sam. 8:12). Still later we find Amalek playing a role in the story of Esther. Esther and her uncle Mordecai were descended from the same family as King Saul (Esther 2:5). But their great enemy Haman was an Agagite (Esther 3:1), a descendant of the royal house of the Amalekites. (The Amalekite king bore the title *Agag*.) The old struggle against Amalek here flared up again. Actually, the struggle was between the seed of the woman and the seed of the serpent. If you bear this in mind, you will gain a much better understanding of the book of Esther.



*He declares his word to Jacob, his statutes and ordinances to Israel (Ps. 147:19).*

## **5. Israel at Sinai**

*The mount of God.* When you travel east across the Red Sea, a mountain becomes visible on the horizon at a certain point. According to the tradition, this mountain is the Horeb or Sinai of the book of Exodus. In the Bible it is also called the *mount of God*. It was there that Moses saw the Lord in the burning bush, and it was there that a great miracle occurred: the Lord appeared to His people for a special purpose. When the prophet Elijah was in the depths of despair during King Ahab's days because of Israel's abandonment of her covenant obligations, he fled to the mount of God. It was there that he made his complaints known to God (I Kings 19:8ff).

Sinai is the place where the Lord solemnly *entered into a covenant* with His people. "I am the LORD your God." Mount Horeb is the place where the law of the ten commandments was proclaimed, the place where Moses, as a true mediator or intermediary, spoke to the Lord face to face.

When the Israelites pitched their tents at Sinai, the Lord decreed that no one was to climb the mountain or even walk on its slopes. The people were commanded to consecrate themselves and prepare to meet God, for God Himself would descend to meet them. The Lord revealed Himself to them in an awesome display of power over nature. The mountain smoked and quaked, and trumpet blasts from a ram's horn filled the air.

*The God of Sinai.* We find many allusions to this revelation at Sinai in later Scripture. In Psalm 68:8-9, reference is made to the earthquake at Sinai. In the prayer

of Habakkuk, the Lord is portrayed as the God who exercises control over nature (Hab. 3). In Psalm 18 we see the same thing: deliverance from the hand of the enemy is to come through some natural catastrophe sent by Yahweh.

The God of Sinai is a terrible God. On Mount Horeb He also revealed Himself to Elijah in a mighty wind, an earthquake, a fire, and a still, small voice (I Kings 19:11ff). When we read what the prophets have to say about the “day of the Lord,” that is, a day of judgment, their language and comparisons remind us of the revelations at Sinai. Even the events accompanying the death of Christ (Matt. 27:51) and Christ’s description of the fate awaiting Jerusalem make us think of what happened at Sinai. Finally, the amazing book of Revelation repeatedly speaks of thunder and lightning issuing from the throne of God (Rev. 4:5; 6:1; 8:5; 10:3; 11:9; 14:2; 16:18).

The Lord is and remains the God who appeared at Sinai. He is the God who revealed Himself to Abraham in a smoking fire pot and a flaming torch passing between the two halves of slaughtered sacrificial animals (Gen. 15:17). What Abraham saw was already a prophecy of the journey through the wilderness—think of the pillar of fire—and the events at Sinai.

Is the Lord a God of nature, then? Let’s put it this way: He is not a nature god like Baal and Hadad and the other gods of rain and weather worshiped by the Canaanites. He is a God who stands *above* nature, who governs the creation, who can call on natural forces to *serve* Him as He reveals Himself to man in His Word. The important thing has always been that the Lord *spoke* to His people at Sinai (see Heb. 12:18ff).

The people were not destroyed by the sound of His voice: they survived. However frightening the Lord may be as a holy God, He is also gracious, dealing with His people in a loving way. Just as Moses heard God speaking in the burning bush at Horeb and survived, Israel survived its en-

counter with God. “Out of heaven he let you hear his voice, that he might discipline you; and on earth he let you see his great fire, and you heard his words out of the midst of the fire. Know therefore this day, and lay it to your heart, that the LORD is God in heaven above and on the earth beneath; there is no other” (Deut. 4:36, 39).

*Borne on eagles’ wings.* What was the purpose of the words spoken by God? The purpose is clear from Exodus 19:3-8, which was to be read in the worship service each time the law itself was read. Blessed is the congregation that sees the connection between the “law” and this “introduction” to the law, in which the Lord speaks some beautiful words full of comfort for His people. “You have seen how I bore you on eagles’ wings and *brought you to myself*,” i.e. to Sinai, the mount of God. “Now therefore, if you will obey my voice and keep my covenant, you shall be *my own possession* among all peoples; for all the earth is mine, and you shall be to me a *kingdom of priests* and a *holy nation*,” i.e. a nation consecrated to God.

Aren’t these beautiful assurances? When we hear the word *law*, we picture in our minds a harsh dictator issuing command after command, rule after rule. The word *law* immediately makes us think of oppressive restrictions. But to the Israelite, *law* (Hebrew: *torah*) actually meant *teaching*, something that directs our steps through life. The teachings and directions for our journey through life come from the gracious God who delivered us from slavery and saved our lives.

The art of ancient Egypt often included the wings of an eagle, sometimes attached to the sun. We find this motif in Assyrian art as well. And in the heraldry of both Germany and the U.S.A. we find eagles.

In their years in the wilderness, the Israelites had plenty of opportunity to observe eagles and vultures giving flying lessons to their young who had not yet mastered this art.

The Lord now revealed Himself through this very metaphor. In a song at the end of his life, Moses declared:

Like an eagle that stirs up its nest,  
that flutters over its young,  
spreading out its wings, catching them,  
bearing them on its pinions,  
the LORD alone did lead him [i.e. Israel],  
and there was no foreign god with him (Deut. 32:11-12).

This metaphor also occurs in the New Testament. The “woman” in Revelation 12 (i.e. the Church) is given the wings of an eagle and is thereby enabled to escape the dragon by fleeing into the wilderness. This shows us what a great role the introduction to the law plays in the New Testament.

*The Lord’s possession.* The early Christian church was well acquainted with this section of Scripture. This is apparent also from the fact that other sentences from this “introduction” are cited in the New Testament. Think of the expression “a kingdom of priests” and Israel’s new name—“the LORD’s possession.” How rich in meaning these terms are!

The Church is the property of the Lord, His “possession.” In Deuteronomy this theme also comes up repeatedly (see 7:6; 14:2; 26:18; see also Ps. 74:2; 135:4). When Paul took leave of the leaders of the church at Ephesus, he spoke of the “church of God, which he obtained with the blood of his own Son” (Acts 20:28). Thus the Church became God’s possession, according to Paul. Elsewhere he writes that Christ “gave himself for us to redeem us from all iniquity and to purify for himself a *people of his own*” (Titus 2:14). We also find Peter using such language: “But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God’s own people” (I Pet. 2:9).

*The heart of the Penteteuch.* God’s words introducing the “law” have been called the heart and central theme of

the five books of Moses, a revelation of the *essence* and *purpose* of God's covenant. That's why the Scriptures of the new covenant point back to these words so often. Think of the salutation we read in Revelation 1: "To him who loves us and has freed us from our sins by his blood and made us a kingdom, priests to his God and Father, to him be glory and dominion for ever and ever. Amen."

The writers of the New Testament were well aware that this introduction to the law, which gives expression to its essence and central emphasis, is *pure gospel*. This point is significant for our view of the law. At Sinai the Lord did indeed reveal Himself in His overwhelming majesty (see Heb. 12:18ff), but at the same time He made Himself known as Israel's Deliverer and Redeemer. He is not a grim tyrant or an unrelenting taskmaster; He is a faithful Father who freed Israel from slavery and accepted him as His child. That's why the law begins with such evangelical words: "I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage" (20:2).

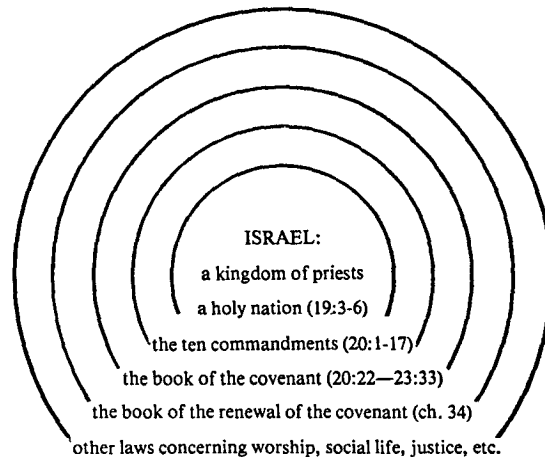
*Law and grace.* The law is founded in God's *grace*. We are to obey the law out of gratitude. The Lord shows His Church how we may and must respond to His love with our love. The Ten Words or ten commandments can be summed up as: "Love God and love your neighbor."

The form in which the law was given is indeed bound up with the conditions under which Israel lived in the ancient Near East. We, who live so much later in history, do not worship graven images, and we have no slaves. Nor is it likely that we covet our neighbor's donkey. But the sinful inclinations that come to the fore in these examples of wrongdoing are a definite part of our lives today. Think of such evils as manmade religion (the graven images of the second commandment), the lack of social awareness on the part of many people (slaves), and coveting what belongs to others.

The Ten Words show us how to serve the Lord in a concrete way in the various areas of life. The prophets and apostles referred repeatedly to these ten commandments (see Jer. 7:9; Hosea 4:2; Zech. 5:3; Rom. 7:7; 13-9; I John 2:7-11). They form the foundation of God's covenantal law.

## 6. The Book of the Covenant

*The Mosaic laws.* All of us, no doubt, are well aware that we are to live by the ten commandments. But what about the laws that follow Exodus 20? Surely all those decrees about offerings and cleansings do not apply to us today! After all, we no longer celebrate the great Day of Atonement or the Feast of Tabernacles.



This question is sometimes answered by declaring that the ten commandments are valid for us while all the cultic and civil laws apply to Israel alone. Unfortunately, it's not quite as simple as that. We must not posit such a gulf between the ten commandments (the decalogue) and all the other laws. On the contrary, there is a close connection between them. We could illustrate this connection by way of the diagram on the preceding page:

The Word of the Lord as recorded in 19:3-6 forms the *heart of the law* (1). Israel is a priestly kingdom of the Lord. The Lord in His sovereign grace has carried Israel on His wings. Now the people are called to show their obedience to God in the covenant.

Closely connected with this central idea, as a circle surrounding it, are the ten commandments or Ten Words of the covenant (2). But these commandments are in turn bound up with the so-called "book of the covenant" (3), which we find in 20:22—23:33. It was on the basis of this book that the Lord made His covenant with Israel.

The important point to note is that this "book of the covenant" is not something separate from the ten commandments. No, it is instead an *application* of these commandments to the Israel of that time. The book of the covenant thus forms a greater circle surrounding the ten commandments.

Next comes the circle of the second book of the covenant (4), which the Israelites received after they worshiped the golden calf at the foot of Mount Sinai. And what about the rest of the laws? They can be regarded as the next concentric circles (5 and 6). In these laws too, the Ten Words are *worked out in a concrete way* that bears specifically on Israel's historical situation. These laws give detailed directions about worship, social life, family life, and so forth.

*The law as a schoolmaster.* Of course we are not to conclude that we are still obliged to live by all those laws today. That would simply be impossible. Some of the laws apply only to the time when Israel was in the wilderness on the way to the promised land. Others relate to practices of that era that have since been given up (e.g. polygamy). We *may* not follow the ordinances with regard to sacrifices, since Christ, through His sacrificial death on the cross, has once and for all done away with the need to offer sacrifices.

Many of the ordinances were intended to help Israel grow up as a nation. The law was to be a schoolmaster leading Israel to Christ, pointing to the Messiah. Despite these limitations, the Mosaic laws provide us with a lot of rich material for preaching. They show us *how* the Lord expects us to live by His commandments. Even the rules no longer applicable to our times point to the coming of the One who fulfilled the law scrupulously and completely (see Belgic Confession, Article 25).

*Applying the ten commandments.* But now we return for a moment to the “book of the covenant.” I’m afraid that even the most faithful Bible readers have no idea what this book of the covenant is all about. The laws it contains are simply not popular.

We have no right to skip over these words of God. We must read them carefully, preferably with a pencil in hand. The Bible, after all, is a “workbook.” When you recognize one of those laws as an application or elaboration of one of the ten commandments, you could underline it or perhaps mark the number of the commandment next to it.

Suppose you were to study 22:21ff with your pencil in hand. How gracious the Lord is to support widows and orphans in time of trouble and to serve as their protector! What a beautiful rule we read in 23:1-3! We must not follow the crowd, for the majority is not always right. Nor



must we allow sympathy to lead us to the conclusion that a certain person's cause is just or that the poor are always in the right. No, each and every case must be decided on its own merits.

In 21:32 we read that the price of a slave is 30 shekels of silver. This is exactly what Judas was paid for betraying Christ (see Zech. 11:12-13). Thus Christ was appraised as equal in value to a slave!

*Laws governing worship.* The book of the covenant deals not only with so-called social and civic matters but also with *worship*. The Israelites were to celebrate three feasts each year. We have already discussed the Passover Feast. The *Feast of Weeks* or Feast of Pentecost was to be celebrated after the completion of the wheat harvest. Finally, there was the *Feast of Tabernacles*, which came at the end of the Israelite year, in our month of October (23:14ff). Later laws were to give even more specific directions for these festivals.

It appears that 23:20-33 is part of the book of the covenant; it contains promises that bear on the rest of the journey through the wilderness and the entry into Canaan. Israel must trust in the Lord and make no covenants with her enemies.

## **7. The Covenant Ceremony**

*The ratification of the covenant.* The contents of the "book of the covenant" were communicated to Moses while he was on the mountain. Then he came down and passed on to the people what he had been told. They, in turn, promised to abide by the words and laws of the Lord. He also took the time to write down everything he had heard. Here the fine education he had received in Egypt stood him in good stead.

Now an event of great significance took place: at the foot of Mount Sinai, the people entered into a covenant with the Lord. An altar was erected, surrounded by twelve pillars. As soon as you see the number *twelve*, you think of the twelve tribes of Israel. *Twelve* was Israel's number. Christ had twelve apostles, and the New Jerusalem in Revelation has twelve gates. This is also the reason why Elijah built an altar of twelve stones (I Kings 18:31-2).

Sacrifices were brought. Half the blood of the sacrificed animals was thrown against the altar. Around the altar stood twelve pillars representing the twelve tribes of Israel. The altar was consecrated through this blood. By means of sacrificial blood shed for the sake of reconciliation, the Lord sought communion with His sinful people.

*Blood as a seal.* What happened to the rest of the blood? First Moses read the book of the covenant to the people once more. He had written everything down carefully in a codex. Was Israel still in agreement? He was given the same answer as before: "All that the LORD has spoken we will do, and we will be obedient" (24:7).

Then Moses took the rest of the blood and threw it with great force over the people. "Behold the blood of the covenant which the LORD has made with you in accordance with all these words," i.e. the laws that were given (24:8). The nation was now tied to its God through those laws. But the blood thrown on the people was at the same time a reminder that there could be constant communion only because of the blood shed for the sake of reconciliation. The covenant was *sealed* with blood!

All of this points ahead to the work of Christ. Through His holy blood, He inaugurated and sealed a new covenant! In many churches, certain words of Jesus are quoted just before the wine is lifted to the lips in the communion service: "This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins" (Matt.

26:28; see also Heb. 9:18-28). Elsewhere we read of “sprinkling” with the blood of Jesus (I Pet. 1:2). From *Sinai*, then, a line runs to *Golgotha*. This makes it clear that under the old covenant, grace and atonement were already the foundation of Israel’s existence.

*The glory of the Lord.* On the basis of this symbolic atonement and reconciliation, certain of the Israelites were permitted to approach the Lord after the covenant had been made. The privileged representatives were Moses, Aaron with two of his sons, and 70 of the elders.

They encountered the Lord in all His glory. The pavement under His feet was “sapphire stone, like the very heaven for clearness” (24:10). The most amazing thing of all was that they had seen the glory of the Lord and lived to tell about it. The grace of reconciliation protected them.

They celebrated their meeting with the Lord by eating a meal together. Just as we commune with the Lord in a spiritual way by means of the Lord’s supper, they communed with the King of the covenant by eating and drinking (24:11).

Meanwhile, Moses went higher up the mountain all by himself. He was to receive instructions about the manner in which God wished to be worshiped and also about the building of a holy place. The Lord spoke with him out of the darkness for 40 days and 40 nights.

*I come and I will dwell in the midst of you, says the LORD (Zech 2:10).*

## **8. The Tabernacle**

*The first commandment.* One way of looking at the building specifications for Israel’s sanctuary is to view

them as an elaboration and application of the first commandment. If the Israelites were to serve God and no one else, they would have to be told *where* and *how* He wished to be served.

The fact that the Lord ordered the building of a tabernacle was also a great manifestation of His *grace*. Through this command He was saying that He wished to  *dwell in the midst of His people* (25:8). This, too, is clearly a prophecy about the Christ. In Christ God came to His people: “The Word became flesh and dwelt among us” (John 1:14). One day the Father and the Christ will be with us permanently: “Behold, the dwelling of God is with men. He will dwell with them, and they shall be his people, and God himself will be with them” (Rev. 21:3; see also Ex. 29:45-6; Num. 5:3; 35:34; Ezek. 43:7; 48:35; Zech. 2:10-11; 8:3; II Cor. 6:16).

*A throne room in a tent.* Just what was this tabernacle which the Israelites were to build? To begin with, we should note that it was only a tent. We use *tabernacle*, the old-fashioned word for *tent*, so that everyone will realize we are referring to the sanctuary used by Israel in the wilderness.

To get a better idea of what the tabernacle was like, we should think of the type of chamber in which an ancient king would receive people. The king sits on his throne. Spices are burned to create a pleasant aroma. Bodyguards are present to protect the king. There is plenty of light in the chamber as people approach the king. They lay down their gifts before him. Outside the palace there is a courtyard, and in the courtyard a fountain. When there is a festival going on, the meals are served in the courtyard. Such a throne room is similar to the tabernacle in many ways.

*The Holy of Holies.* Central to the tabernacle were the Holy Place and the Most Holy Place or Holy of Holies,

where the ark was kept. (The word *ark* actually means *chest*.) The stone tables of the law were to be placed in the ark. On top of the ark there was a “mercy seat,” which was somehow connected with the two cherubs in the Holy of Holies.

We already read about cherubs in the story of the fall into sin (Gen. 3:24); they are angels who guard the throne of God and jealously protect His holiness. We will learn more about them in Ezekiel and Revelation. The presence of these throne angels indicated that the Lord regarded the “ark” as His earthly throne. In the ark, the “Magna Charta” of the covenant was deposited. Above the ark were the symbols of the Lord’s holiness.

The presence of the “mercy seat” would give the nation an opportunity once each year (on the great Day of Atonement), to sprinkle some blood symbolizing atonement. (This would be done by the high priest, of course.) Here, too, *atonement* is the *basis* for the Lord’s coming together with His sinful people. Again we see that the “law” clearly preaches Christ. It was by the mercy seat that the Lord wished to meet with Moses (25:21-2).

*The Holy Place.* Let us enter the “Holy Place” now. Although only the high priest was allowed in the Holy of Holies—and only once a year at that, on the great Day of Atonement—the other priests were all allowed in the Holy Place. In this part of the tabernacle there was a *table* on which bread was laid (commonly called the “showbread” or the “bread of the Presence”). This bread symbolized the fact that Israel received its daily bread from the Lord. The gifts of (unleavened) “showbread” were the people’s expression of gratitude to the Creator of life.

In Exodus 25 we read that the Israelites were commanded to make a *lampstand* of pure gold for the tabernacle. The Lord Himself lived in darkness: the Holy of Holies was sealed off from the Holy Place by means of a veil. Yet,

in the chamber where He received His people He wanted *light*—hence the lampstand, with its seven arms.

*Lampstand and the altar of incense.* The lampstand resembled a tree, complete with branches and cups (calyx and petals). The cups looked like almost blossoms. The almond tree blossoms early, and therefore the Israelites called it the “watchful tree,” which is certainly a good name for it.

The idea symbolized by this lampstand is that the Lord is awake and on guard. He protects His people and dispels the darkness for His Church. That lampstand must have been a beautiful sight in the tabernacle—a light-giving almond tree, glittering in its golden beauty.

The Lord makes His face shine upon His people. Because Israel enjoyed the light of His countenance, she could be a light to the world. Today the modern nation of Israel includes the menorah (a candelabrum holding seven candles) in its coat of arms, but it does not recognize the Messiah Jesus as *the* Light of the world.

Each of the churches has received its own lampstand in the heavenly temple, with Christ in the center (Rev. 1:12, 20; 2:5). But if they do not persevere and cling to the Word, the lampstand will be taken away from them.

There is another object that belongs in the Holy Place, namely, the altar of incense (30:1-10). It was to be erected right in front of the ark, just outside the Holy of Holies. Every morning and evening, an offering would be brought before the face of the Lord to symbolize the prayers of Israel. The day would begin and end with prayer. By means of the incense offering, the Israelites would symbolically make their needs known to the King of all the earth and thank Him.

*A portable sanctuary.* In Exodus 26 we are told about the tabernacle itself. Because it was the sanctuary of a

nomadic people, it was constructed in such a way that it could easily be transported. (In the days of Solomon, it was finally replaced with a temple.) It is clear especially from the descriptions of the ark and the altar of incense that portability was a factor to be taken into account. Everything had to be made in such a way that it could be carried by means of poles. The Lord whom the Israelites were to serve was a God who moved ahead of His people as their Shepherd.

The material of which the tabernacle itself was built was the same as that used for the objects within it—shittim wood or acacia wood. We must remember that the Sinai peninsula was a plain without large trees. There were some small bushes or shrubs to be found here and there, as well as an occasional thorn tree.

The Israelites must have used the materials available in the wilderness in which they lived. In addition, they had taken along a great deal of material when they left Egypt. The passage of caravans through the wilderness gave them the opportunity to acquire other materials they might need. Thus it should not surprise us that they had gold to cover the wood.

*The beginning of an era.* The building of this sanctuary could perhaps be regarded as the beginning of a new era in the history of *art*. But even more important is the fact that it represents the beginning of a new era in the history of *revelation*.

However beautiful the tabernacle may have been, the finest buildings in Egypt and Babylon must have been even more beautiful. In the eyes of the cultured world, the tabernacle was only the sanctuary of a group of nomads. Yet, the Lord wished to dwell in the midst of His people. His presence in the tabernacle pointed ahead to His definitive presence among His people in the new creation.

*The outer court.* When we enter the court surrounding the Holy Place and the Holy of Holies, the first thing we encounter is the bronze laver (30:17-21). Its meaning is clear enough: the priests had to be clean when they performed their services, for the Lord is a holy God.

Finally, there was the altar of burnt offering, which was overlaid with bronze. Actually, it was a portable casing in which earth or loose stones could be placed. It was on this altar that the offerings were to be laid.

Each morning and evening, a lamb was to be sacrificed. This meant that the offering of the Passover lamb and the offering made in Isaac's place were being repeated every day. There were also other sacrifices that could be made on this altar on behalf of certain individuals or groups or even the entire nation.

This altar stood in the front of the tabernacle before the Holy Place and the Holy of Holies—in other words, before the Lord's "countenance." It was there that the offerings were to be brought each day (27:1-8; 29:38-46).

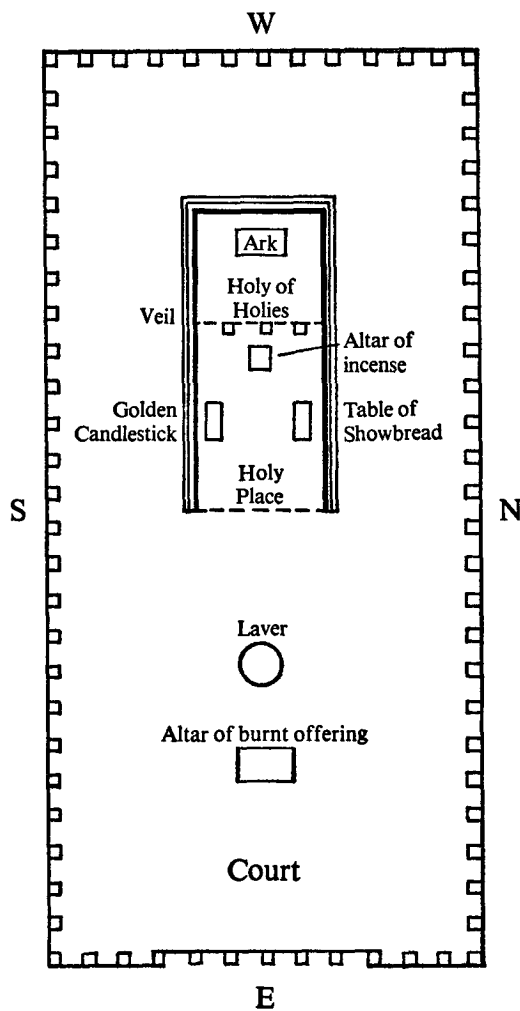
*The priests.* In Exodus 28-29, we are told about the garments worn by the priests and the ordination of the priests. When we read about the high priest's breastpiece with its twelve precious stones, we are reminded at once of the twelve foundations of the new Jerusalem (Rev. 21).

The ceremonies involved in the ordination of priests might strike you as somewhat strange. Yet all these ceremonies make sense—provided we take into account what we read elsewhere in Scripture. The cleansing and the garments speak for themselves. The young bull slaughtered in the ceremony was intended as a sin offering; the bull assumed the sins of the priests vicariously, which is why they laid their hands on its head.

At the same time, we see how imperfect and incomplete this offering was. The priests themselves were sinful people who needed to ask forgiveness for their sins. All of this



cried out for the perfect Priest, the Priest who would be holy and without sin. Here we read the name of Jesus Christ between the lines!



Furthermore, a ram was sacrificed as a burnt offering. A second ram was offered as an ordination sacrifice. The blood of the second ram was put on the ears, hands and feet of Aaron and his sons: their hearing, their deeds, and the path they walked was thereby dedicated to Yahweh. The official garments worn by the priests were also sprinkled with blood and anointing oil—another symbol of consecration to the Lord. Finally, what was left of the second ram was to be offered to the Lord together with a cake and a loaf of bread. Yet, we learn later that the priests had the right to eat this food themselves. This makes sense only when we bear in mind that during the seven-day ceremony of ordination, the priests being ordained were engaging in the very tasks that would later become their daily work. As servants of the Lord, they were to eat at His table.

Later we will see that there were also offerings in which the people themselves ate part of the flesh sacrificed in the court of the tabernacle. Even the Israelites who were not set aside as priests could sometimes come into the Lord's sanctuary to be filled at His table.

## **9. The Covenant Broken and Renewed**

*The mediator.* We call Christ the Mediator of the *new* covenant and Moses the mediator of the *old* covenant. A mediator is an intermediary between two parties.

In the section that begins with 32:11, we see Moses serving as *mediator*. What he achieved in this role reminds us of Jesus Christ, the greatest mediator of all.

That Moses was a mediator is already apparent from the fact that he was the one to whom the laws were entrusted on Mount Horeb. The Lord Himself gave Moses the two tables of the law inscribed by God's finger.

*Disloyalty to Moses.* The people of Israel did not demonstrate a strong loyalty to Moses. Because he remained on the mountain for such a long time, they gave him up for dead: “This Moses, the man who brought us up out of the land of Egypt, we do not know what has become of him” (32:1).

The people also argued that Moses had often spoken to Pharaoh of “the LORD’s feast in the wilderness.” Wasn’t it about time to hold this feast? Surely a substitute could be found to take the place of Moses as mediator.

Aaron would have to make an image for them to worship. And that’s just what Aaron did. A collection was held to gather the necessary materials. Soon the Israelites had a molten calf to bow before.

*A visible god.* According to the Revised Standard Version, the people said: “These are your gods, O Israel, who brought you up out of the land of Egypt!” (32:4). But we could just as well translate this sentence as follows: “This is your God, who brought you up out of the land of Egypt!”

Aaron declared: “Tomorrow shall be a feast *to the LORD*” (32:5). Thus it was not the intention of these revelers to break with Yahweh, their Deliverer. On the contrary, they were holding the feast for Him. But they did so in a way that conflicted with the *second* commandment.

Theirs was a heathen way of worshiping. Pagans cannot worship without something visible to represent their gods. But the Lord is the God of the Word. He wants to be worshiped as the invisible one who will not allow anyone to make an image of Him.

*Intercession by Moses.* It is understandable that the Lord became very angry about what the people had done and communicated His anger to Moses. He proposed to destroy Israel. He would then keep His promise to the patriarchs by making a great nation of Moses.

But Moses, the mediator forgotten by his own people, now took action. Arguing against Yahweh's proposal, he pointed to the negative impression that the destruction of Israel would make on Egypt. In the eyes of the nations, wouldn't the *exodus* from Egypt then amount to entering the kingdom of the dead? And what about the covenant with Abraham? Didn't it include some strong promises with regard to this people? (32:11-13). We read that the Lord listened to the voice of Moses as he interceded for his people.

*Judgment through Levi.* Then Moses started down the mountain. When he heard all the singing and caught sight of the calf (perhaps on a banner of some sort), he was furious. He threw down the stone tablets on which the statutes of the covenant were inscribed, breaking them. After all, had the people not broken the covenant with the Lord?

It finally dawned on Moses what had happened. He would have to act decisively and mete out drastic punishment. Therefore he cried out: "Who is on the LORD's side? Come to me." And all the *Levites* went over to him. Moses commanded them to kill all the Israelites around them, regardless of who they might be. The Levites did so.

As you consider this incident, bear in mind what Levi, the father of this tribe, once did at Shechem: he committed murder, making evil use of the sacrament of circumcision in the process. Because of this, Jacob cursed him on his deathbed (see Gen. 34 and 49:5ff). It was as though Levi had been rehabilitated.

Levi now used his power not for his own interests or for his family with a small "f" but for his Family with a capital "F"; he did it for the cause of the Lord. He knew how to "hate" his father and mother for the Lord's sake. Therefore, just before his death, Moses blessed Levi,

who said of his father and mother,  
“I regard them not”;  
he disowned his brothers,  
and ignored his children.  
For they observed thy word,  
and kept thy covenant.  
Bless, O LORD, his substance,  
and accept the work of his hands (Deut. 33:9, 11).

The blessing granted to Levi was the priesthood. The Levites were to serve the Lord in the sanctuary. This they did until Levi was replaced by our great High Priest Jesus Christ.

*A covenant of grace.* Even after this drastic punishment, Israel was not completely reconciled with the Lord. (Moses had burned the molten calf, mixed the powder with water, and made the Israelites drink it.) At the very outset, then, the covenant had been radically broken. The bond now had to be restored.

Who would be capable of this other than the mediator Moses? Therefore we see him ascending the mountain and lying prostrate before the Lord for 40 days to ask for forgiveness (32:30ff; Deut. 2:25ff). If the Lord wanted a substitutionary sacrifice to atone for Israel’s sin, let Him destroy Moses himself.

The Lord rejected this proposal. Although Moses served as mediator, he could not die for his people. Only the other Mediator, Jesus Christ, could do that. Moses could do no more than *plead* for his people.

The outcome was that the Lord promised to let the people go on. He would not be with them Himself but would send His angel to accompany them. If He accompanied them Himself, He would probably have to destroy Israel in His holiness.

But Moses continued to plead for his people: “If thy presence will not go with me, do not carry us up from

ere" (33:15). This prayer was also heard. The Lord Himself would be with them. With that, the relationship was restored from the Lord's side.

We must take careful note of the implications of this event. It is crystal clear that Israel had no right whatsoever to the Lord's favor. That the Lord again chose to enter into a covenant with His people was purely a matter of grace; actually, it was an anticipation of the work of Christ.

When the Lord fulfills the promises of long ago, He is not under any obligation to do so. He would be completely justified in *not* fulfilling them. When He does fulfill them, He does so in divine freedom and sovereign love. Again and again we see that the Bible is not a book in which man lays claim to what is his by right. No Israelite had the right to demand this and that because he was an actual descendant of Abraham. There is no room for boasting. The covenant remains a covenant of *grace*.

*The glory of the Lord.* Moses himself must have been somewhat surprised that the Lord was so gracious. Therefore he asked for a sign. When the covenant was first made, he was allowed to see the glory of the Lord. Now he asked to see it again (33:18).

We read in the next chapter that the Lord did show Moses His shining glory. Indeed, Moses not only saw but also heard. Yahweh passed before him and called out with His own voice: "The LORD, the LORD, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness, keeping steadfast love for thousands, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin, but who will by no means clear the guilty, visiting the iniquity of the fathers upon the children and the children's children, to the third and fourth generation" (34:6-7; see also Num. 14:18; Ps. 86:15; 103:13; Jon. 4:2).

These were the Lord's own words. Therefore Moses fell on his knees and started pleading for his people again:

“Let the LORD, I pray thee, go in the midst of us, although it is a stiff-necked people; and pardon our iniquity and our sin, and take us for thy inheritance” (34:9).

*A review of the covenant.* The Lord gave an encouraging answer: “Behold, I make a covenant.” The Lord would again do wonders. But at the same time, He bound His people to His law. Therefore He gave a short summary of what was already contained in the book of the covenant.

It is striking that particular emphasis is laid on the worship service. This shouldn’t surprise us. Israel’s sin of erecting the molten calf was a violation of the agreement concerning cultic activities. Thus the Lord once more laid out the rules for worship and drove them home.

Again the Lord inscribed the “Ten Words,” the decalogue, on two tablets of stone. This time Moses did not have to throw the two tablets to the ground in anger: the people were fully aware of their guilt and hungered for communion with Yahweh. Later Moses was to put these tablets, the “testimony,” in the ark (40:20).

*Moses’ veil.* When Moses came down from the mountain, he was so radiant with the glory of the Lord that the people did not dare approach him. He called the heads of the people to come to him while he still reflected this glory, and he passed on what the Lord had told him. Then he covered his face with a veil.

Paul was calling this incident to mind when he declared that the glory of the old covenant is less than that of the new covenant. In the *new* covenant, we see the glory of the Lord without any veil to obscure our view. Our faces increasingly reflect that glory.

That’s why it’s such a serious matter for the Jews to go on living just as though this were still the time of Moses. They have a veil before their eyes and do not see that everything has been fulfilled in Christ. They do read the

Bible, but they place their veil over everything they read and do not see the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ (II Cor. 3:12—4:6).

*Building the tabernacle.* At the end of the book of Exodus, we read how Israel took steps to put the first commandment into practice: a sanctuary was built. All the objects needed were made by artists. The garments of the priests were sewn. The tabernacle could now be erected and the service begun (Ex. 35-40).

The next book of the Bible will tell us more about the place of sacrifice in the service of the Lord. The last thing we see in Exodus is the cloud, the glory of the Lord filling the sanctuary. The Lord dwells in the midst of His people!



# Index

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- Allegorical interpretation, 12  
Almond tree, 134  
Amalekites, 120  
Ammon, 80  
Anabaptists, 8  
Angel of the Lord, 77, 82, 90  
Apocryphal writings, N.T., 22-3  
Apocryphal writings, O.T., 18ff  
Archeology, 30-1  
Ark of Noah, 66  
Ark of the covenant, 133, 135, 143  
Astarte, 68-9, 73, 99  
Athanasius, 23  
Atonement (see Redemption and atonement)  
Atonement, Day of, 133  
Augustine, 23  
Authority of Scripture, 9ff, 18, 22, 27-8, 30-1, 37-8  
Baal, 69, 73, 99, 122  
Babylonian mythology, 56, 61-2, 67-8  
Baptism, 67, 113, 118  
Belgic Confession, 7, 24, 128  
Bethel, 87, 90-1  
Bible translation, 51  
Biblical criticism, 12, 15, 24ff, 32, 34ff, 38-9, 52  
Blood, 63, 67, 104, 112-13, 130-1, 138  
Book of the covenant, 126ff, 143  
Bultmann, Rudolf, 28-31

- Canaanite religion, 69, 73, 122  
 Canaanites, 69, 73, 80, 83, 92, 94-5, 99  
 Canon, N.T., 11-12, 22-44-5  
 Canon, O.T., 18ff, 43-4  
 Canons of Dordt, 8  
 Ceremonial laws, 126-7  
 Charismatic movement, 11  
 Church as God's people, 47, 53-4, 58, 60, 64-5, 70-1, 74, 80-1, 84, 88, 94, 104-6, 118, 124  
 Circumcision, 78-9, 91, 113-14, 140  
 Cleanliness and purification, 66, 114  
 Communion, sacrament of (see Lord's supper)  
 Covenant between God and His people, 13, 32-4, 41-3, 53, 58, 62, 65, 67, 76-7, 104, 106-8, 124-5, 129-31, 142-3  
 Covenant wrath, 33-4, 80  
 Covenants in the ancient Near East, 31  
 Creation of the world, 54ff  
 Crucifixion of Jesus, 122  
 Curse of Ham, 69  
 Curse resting on creation, 54, 60, 65, 72-3  
  
 Day of the Lord, 122  
 Dead Sea Scrolls, 14-16  
  
 Demons (see Satan and demons)  
 Demythologizing, 29-30, 32  
 Destruction of Jerusalem and the temple, 11, 19, 92  
 Differences between nations, 70-1  
 Documentary hypothesis, 24ff, 34  
  
 Eagles' wings, 123-4  
 Edda, the, 7  
 Edomites, 92-3  
 Egypt, 75, 78, 92, 95ff, 111-12  
*Elohim*, 25, 61  
*El Shaddai*, 110  
 Ephraim, tribe of, 99  
 Evolutionism, 24, 62  
 Exodus command, 72  
  
 Feast of Purim, 19  
 Feast of Tabernacles, 19  
 Feast of Weeks (Pentecost), 19  
 First-born, blessing of, 85-6, 99-100  
 First-born, consecration of, 113-14  
 Form criticism, 28  
  
 "Gap" theory, 62  
 Genealogies, 64-5, 70-2  
 Genealogy of Jesus, 96  
 Glory of the Lord, 131,

142-4  
 Gnosticism, 30-2, 63  
 Gospel according to John,  
   27, 30-1, 36  
 Greek language, 14, 17, 19  
  
 Hadad, 122  
 Hebrew language, 13, 15  
 Hebrews, book of, 23  
 High priest, 133, 136  
 Holy of Holies, 132-3, 136  
 Holy Place, 132-4, 136  
 Holy Spirit, 10ff  
 Horizontalism, 12  
  
 Image of God, 57, 67  
 Immanuel promise, 132,  
   135, 144  
 Inspiration of Scripture, 9,  
   22, 24, 51  
  
 James, book of, 23  
 Jericho, 37  
 Jerusalem and the temple,  
   41-2, 82  
 Jerusalem Bible, 21  
 Jewish question, 81, 89,  
   143-4  
  
 King James Bible, 16, 19-20,  
   100  
 Koran, the, 7  
  
 Lampstand, 133-4  
 Leaven (yeast), 113, 133  
 Levirate marriage, 95-6  
  
 Levites, 76, 114, 140-1  
 Lord's supper, 113, 130-1  
 Luther Bible, 20  
 Luther, Martin, 12, 118  
  
 Manmade (self-willed) wor-  
   ship and religion, 125  
 Manna, 119-20  
 Manuscripts, Biblical, 13ff,  
   31, 34-5  
 Mary (mother of Jesus), 23  
 Mediator, office of, 118,  
   121, 138ff  
 Melchizedek and the priest-  
   hood, 76, 114  
 Mercy seat, 133  
 Moab, 80  
 Mosaic legislation, 42-3,  
   48, 123, 125ff  
 Mysticism, 12  
  
 Nature/grace, 101  
 New Israel, 94  
 Numbers in the Bible, 35  
  
 Offerings (see Sacrifices  
   and offerings)  
 Oil, 138  
  
 Passover, 18-19, 103-5,  
   112-13, 115, 136  
 Paul, 27  
 Pentecost, 11, 45, 69-70  
 Prophecy, 41-3, 94  
 Providence of God, 81  
 Purification (see Cleanli-

- ness and purification)
- Ram's horn, 121
- Redemption and atone-  
ment, 112-13, 115, 130-  
1, 133
- Redemptive history, 11-12,  
41, 43, 46ff, 53-4, 58,  
61-2, 64, 67, 74-5, 104
- Reformation, the, 8
- “Remnant”, 74
- Rest, 65-7
- Resurrection of Jesus, 29-  
30
- Revelation, book of, 23,  
27, 45, 105, 122, 124
- Revelation of God, 47
- Revised Standard Version,  
100, 133
- Revival movements, 11
- Roman Catholicism, 8, 19,  
21
- Sabbath day, 57-8
- Sacrifices and offerings,  
66-7, 76, 81-2, 112-13,  
115, 128, 130, 134ff, 144
- Satan and demons, 62
- Schilder, Klaas, 62
- Seed of the serpent, 60, 64,  
109, 120
- Septuagint, 19
- Sermon on the Mount, 33
- Seven, 113
- Sexuality, 95
- Shechem, 73, 90-1
- “Showbread”, 133
- Sign of Jonah, 11
- Sin, 59, 65-6, 74, 80, 94
- Sinai, 121-3
- Song of Moses (Deut. 32)  
105
- Sovereignty of God, 84-6,  
88-9, 92, 94-5, 99-101,  
109
- Spiritualism, 12
- “Strangers” here below, 73,  
82-3, 91-3
- Synoptic question, 27, 36-  
7, 48
- Tabernacle, 131ff, 144
- Ten commandments, 41,  
43, 125ff, 131-2, 143
- “Theology of the church”,  
28, 30, 39
- Tischendorf, 16
- Toledoth, 54-5
- Torah, 18, 53-4, 123
- Truth, 10-11
- Twelve, 130
- “Types”, 97
- Unity of the Bible, 32-46,  
103-4, 124-6
- Wellhausen, Julius, 25
- Woman and man, 58-60
- World Council of Chur-  
ches, 28
- Yahweh*, 25, 61, 107-8, 110