

ROUTE 66: THE CHRISTIAN WAY

WEEK 3: GOD: PRESENCE, PERSONALITY, PROMISES. EXODUS, LEVITICUS, NUMBERS & DEUTERONOMY

As we come to week 3 on our journey, believe it or not, in just one week, 400 Biblical years have passed since we left Jacob's clan in Egypt. But God was still at work controlling the circumstances that would lead to the most significant period, apart from the Christ event, in both Jewish and world history. At the right time, God's next revelation on route 66 tells us of the people and the man He had chosen to further His plans and purposes. Admittedly, some parts of these books, especially all the repetition, makes these books hard going, but God had good reasons for having them recorded in this way. The landmarks chosen for this stage are very important for what they tell us about God. They reveal the Person and the powerful, almighty sovereignty of God shown by manifestations of His presence, personality and enduring faithfulness to His promises; and how His agent mediated these to the people he led for 40 years or so. The importance of these 4 books together with that of Genesis is shown by the fact that in the New Testament you will find Moses is mentioned 79 times, 5 times more than Abraham. References from Exodus alone occur 238 times. A rough count from the references given in the margin of the NIV gives at least 770 references to verses from Genesis to Deuteronomy. So, in many ways, unless you know what these five books are about overall, you will miss why the rest of the Old Testament route takes the course it does. In turn, missing out on that, results in making some of the depth of meaning of New Testament texts elusive and often misunderstood or not understood at all.

So, as we reach Exodus the first junction signposted is Egypt and Midian. For 400 years God has been silent. Constantly exposed to the paganism of Egyptian culture and religion over the centuries, it is possible that the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob could have become only a part of the collective folk memory of the Israelites, especially given the situation we find in the first chapters of Exodus.

Exodus 1:5-8 (NIV) The descendants of Jacob numbered seventy in all; Joseph was already in Egypt. Now Joseph and all his brothers and all that generation died, but the Israelites were exceedingly fruitful; they multiplied greatly, increased in numbers and became so numerous that the land was filled with them. Then a new king, to whom Joseph meant nothing, came to power in Egypt.

Exodus 2:23-25 (NIV) During that long period, the king of Egypt died. The Israelites groaned in their slavery and cried out, and their cry for help because of their slavery went up to God. 24 God heard their groaning and he remembered his covenant with Abraham, with Isaac and with Jacob. 25 So God looked on the Israelites and was concerned about them.

By the time this junction is reached, these initially welcomed 70 guests in the country had increased so much in number that they were regarded as a threat, and were reduced to oppressive slavery. But all that time God had taken the time to plan for this eventuality. It was the ingenuity of the Hebrew midwives and Moses' mother and sister that Pharaoh's plan to have every Hebrew boy killed was thwarted. Consequently, the number of Hebrews had

ROUTE 66: THE CHRISTIAN WAY

increased to the point they were numerous enough to constitute the first community of God. Included in that plan was the miraculous preservation of the child who would become His spokesperson to that community. But that was to take another 80 years for the first chapters of Exodus show us God's preparation of Moses for the destiny he was to fulfil. This involved Moses' first 40 years from his birth, growth to manhood, educated in the ways of the Egyptians, until his murder of an Egyptian slave master led to his banishment to Midian. And it was only after he had spent 40 years there that God's preparation of him to fulfil his destiny reached its critical stage.

The first key landmark is God revealing Himself to Moses at the burning bush. This is a crucial stage along our route because it is the first time for 400 years that God again reveals His existence and His presence in a highly visible fashion. It was the revelation given to Moses here that marked the radical change which accelerated the pace of God revealing more of Himself in order for people to come to know Him at a personal level. And the very first way He did this was by revealing to Moses His personal name. We all know that the first step in getting to know anyone is by finding out what they are called. But God's name, on this occasion, conveyed so much more.

Exodus 3:13-15 (NIV) Moses said to God, "Suppose I go to the Israelites and say to them, 'The God of your fathers has sent me to you,' and they ask me, 'What is his name?' Then what shall I tell them?" 14 God said to Moses, "I am who I am. This is what you are to say to the Israelites: 'I am has sent me to you.'". "This is my name forever, the name you shall call me from generation to generation.

Exodus 15:26 (NIV) He said, "If you listen carefully to the Lord your God and do what is right in his eyes, if you pay attention to his commands and keep all his decrees, I will not bring on you any of the diseases I brought on the Egyptians, for I am the Lord, who heals you."

Exodus 17:13-15 (NIV) So Joshua overcame the Amalekite army with the sword. Moses built an altar and called it The Lord is my Banner.

The designation of 'I AM' indicates the all-encompassing attributes which make God self-existent and self-sufficient. Henceforth, this would be translated as Yahweh or the Lord. During the next 40 years God would add to peoples' knowledge of Him by giving other names the most prominent of which were 'The Lord who heals you', 'the Lord is my banner' and 'the Lord who sanctifies'. Apart from the plagues, disease and death the people brought upon themselves because of idolatry, persistent grumbling about God's provision, challenges to Moses' leadership and outright rebellion, the Israelites remained healthy throughout this time. And the people were healed when they repented of their disobedience, the raising of the bronze serpent to heal the snake bites, being one with major symbolic meaning at a later time. The Lord is my banner was given after the Israelite victory over the Amalekites and the Lord who sanctifies takes on especial significance when we come to our next landmark.

Exodus 5:2 (NIV) Pharaoh said, "Who is the Lord, that I should obey him and let Israel go? I do not know the Lord and I will not let Israel go."

ROUTE 66: THE CHRISTIAN WAY

Exodus 15:11-13 (NIV) Who among the gods is like you, Lord? Who is like you—majestic in holiness, awesome in glory, working wonders? 12 “You stretch out your right hand, and the earth swallows your enemies. 13 In your unfailing love you will lead the people you have redeemed. In your strength you will guide them to your holy dwelling.

Deuteronomy 4:37 (NIV) Because he loved your ancestors and chose their descendants after them, he brought you out of Egypt by his Presence and his great strength.....

The name God gave to Moses was a significant landmark, and as Pharaoh found to his cost, was not to be taken lightly. His contemptuous dismissal of it led to the plagues which eventually forced him to let God’s people go. The burning bush and the plagues were followed by other landmarks that demonstrated both the presence and the power of the God they were to call Yahweh. God’s powerful presence was made visible by provision of a cloud, an unusual sight in a desert location, as a guide in daylight; and an unheard of and unseen since, pillar of fire as a light in the darkness. The verses quoted were part of the worship offered after the Israelites were saved from the pursuing Egyptians by the parting of the Red Sea. And as they travelled through the desert for the next 40 years, they were miraculously provided with food in the form of manna and quails. The bitter waters of Marah were made sweet and on another occasion water was obtained by striking a rock. Add to that the record that neither their clothes, nor their sandals wore out, (Deuteronomy 29:5) and it can be seen that God’s revealed power was evidence of His presence with this people every step of the way. The Israelites were given practical demonstrations of God’s presence tailored to their situation, and the record shows that God’s guidance, protection and provision would be available at all times to His people regardless of how their situations might change in the future. In Moses summing up of their incredible journey, He attributes reaching their destination to God’s Presence and great strength.

Three months after leaving Egypt we come to our next landmark at Mount Sinai (Horeb). Waltke (p445) has said that when this point in the record is reached, readers find themselves “unexpectedly dumped into an incomprehensible heap of case laws and curtain measurements” - all of which happen in what becomes a building site. They would remain here for another 11 months, during which their religious and cultural identity would be forged. It was forged in the form of words given in the law and the instructions for the making of the Ark of the Covenant, the tabernacle and its furnishings, the priestly garments and all the associated rituals. All that took place at Sinai raised a landmark that towers above every other landmark on the Old Testament stretch of route 66. All future religious activity and culture would be assessed and evaluated, by its standards. That is because all that transpired at this location had a very specific and explicit purpose. This was to reveal the holiness of the personality of God, the personality that His people were expected to aspire to reach, by following all that was communicated to them at Sinai.

Exodus 19:4-6 (NIV) You yourselves have seen what I did to Egypt, and how I carried you on eagles’ wings and brought you to myself. 5 Now if you obey me fully and keep my covenant, then out of all nations you will be my treasured possession. Although the

ROUTE 66: THE CHRISTIAN WAY

whole earth is mine, 6 you will be for me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.’ These are the words you are to speak to the Israelites.”

Leviticus 11:44-45 (NIV) I am the Lord your God; consecrate yourselves and be holy, because I am holy.....I am the Lord, who brought you up out of Egypt to be your God; therefore be holy, because I am holy.

Leviticus 20:26 (NIV) You are to be holy to me because I, the Lord, am holy, and I have set you apart from the nations to be my own.

The significance of this landmark is borne out by the fact that these 11 months take up 58 chapters of what is recorded about the journey from Egypt to the plains of Moab on the borders of the Promised Land. From Exodus 19 to Numbers 10:10 detailed instructions are given designed to turn a homeless and stateless rag-tag of ex-slaves into a treasured possession, a kingdom of priests and a holy nation. By comparison, the rest of the 39 years spent in the wilderness only take up the remaining 25 chapters of Numbers. There is no doubt that travelling this part of the route is hard going, but it’s one that requires us to slow down and take in more of what is to be discovered there. It was what took place during these 11 months that turned these homeless and stateless refugees into the chosen people of God. The giving of the 10 Commandments and the Book of the Law, the building of the tabernacle and Ark of the Covenant with their associated priesthood and rituals, the organisation of the people into an army, with a specific tribal, clan and family structure; and the specifics of how their camp was to be set up and the order of march from Sinai which we find in Numbers, all were put in place during these 11 months.

Many of the details especially about the building of the tabernacle, the priestly garments, the numbers in Numbers and the repetition of laws etc., may seem overemphasised and far too repetitive. When you realise, however, that this was the first time a community of people was faced with the organisation of the religious and cultural norms which would distinguish them from every other tribe at the time, foundations had to be minutely defined.

Leviticus 20:7-8 & 22:32-33 (NKJV) Consecrate yourselves therefore, and be holy, for I am the Lord your God. 8 And you shall keep My statutes, and perform them: I am the Lord who sanctifies you..... You shall not profane My holy name, but I will be hallowed among the children of Israel. I am the Lord who sanctifies you, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, to be your God: I am the Lord.”

Also, there was no point in telling them that they had to be holy or sanctified because He was holy, if they had no concept of what God meant by holiness. That is why God meticulously planned all these developments, for He intended them to have implications for all His people throughout the ages. It was also to reveal to them that in order to become what God had chosen them for, they had to do things His way in accordance with His personality. Justifiably, we could name this landmark, ‘Holiness’ for that is the key word that you will find in frequently mentioned. Ninety per cent of Leviticus is comprised of God’s words and we find that every decree or command laid down by God, here is connected to holiness. This is the prominent aspect of God’s personality contained in book and scholars have worked out

ROUTE 66: THE CHRISTIAN WAY

that the words, holy, holiness and sanctify occur 152 times in Leviticus – 20% of the use of these words in the Old Testament are in this one book. Had God not revealed these aspects of His holy personality, people would never have known the standards God expected from them.

Why the emphasis on holiness? Because it is the very essence of God's personality. He manifests perfect holiness and to be holy is to be God-like. And because of this, God is the source of holiness and the Holy of Holies is so-called because God's presence there makes it the holiest location on the entire earth. The Ark of the Covenant, the depository of the ten commandments, represented God's throne and was the 'mercy seat' and was the most sanctified object. Holiness also encompasses the moral perfection and purity of God's nature. In other words, God's personality is such that not only is His very nature holy, but that as a consequence all His actions, attitudes and words are holy too. God's holiness extends to people, places, objects and even periods of time. All of these are shown in Leviticus to have varying degrees of sanctification by God. For example, the High Priest, his garments and his role is the most holy office in the Israelite community. The Sabbath day is the holiest day of the week. Defined in these records are the sacred personnel, institutions, seasons and rituals, with the most important ritual being the feast of Unleavened Bread, celebrating the Passover which marked deliverance from Egypt. They were the means by which God could be present with His sinful people, while preserving and protecting His holiness. The tabernacle was, to all intents and purposes the dwelling of God on earth, a constant reminder of His nearness.

But holiness is also an indication of what is not holy and Leviticus leaves the Israelites in no doubt as to what is usually referred to as unclean. God distinguishes between the types of uncleanness that can be rectified, for example, by washing and the passage of a certain amount of time; and those which cannot be rectified and incur the death penalty or cutting off from the people. We might consider death as punishment for something like adultery excessive. However, the severity of punishment is another indication that God meant what He said and His commands had to be treated with all seriousness. Deliberate disobedience had consequences and these reflect God's hatred of sin because it created unholiness and uncleanness in people, places and things. Sin pollutes all that God was trying to sanctify and purify and, as such, opposes everything He stands for. In all cases, people had the power of choice to obey or disobey, so to a large extent their fate was in their own hands.

A diagram of the organisation God designated for the Israelites camp helps to explain God's revelation of His holiness and its opposite. The tabernacle is placed in the middle. It is the holiest place in the camp. Around it are placed the locations of the 12 tribes. Because these are the people God is prepared to sanctify by revealing His standard of holiness, they are considered clean. Anything and anyone outside that perimeter is regarded as unclean or unholy. Hence, the removal from the camp, either temporarily or permanently, of those with various degrees of uncleanness, for only those considered clean could remain where a holy God dwelt with His people.

Now, it is possible, as some have thought, that God imposed an impossible burden upon the Israelites. But, He had not decreed anything that was not within the bounds of possibility for those who had the will to follow His commands. And He had provided the means of

ROUTE 66: THE CHRISTIAN WAY

atonement for sin through the sacrificial system. Moreover, they were accompanied by the greatest incentives ever given to any people – the promises of God of unconditional love and great blessing for obedience to His laws, and forgiveness for confessed and repented of sin when they failed to obey. Those promises are a prominent landmark at this junction on our route because no nation has ever been given promises of peace, protection, provision and prosperity.

LEVITICUS 26:3-10 If you follow my decrees and are careful to obey my commands, I will send you rain in its season, and the ground will yield its crops and the trees of the field their fruit.

Your threshing will continue until grape harvest and the grape harvest will continue until planting, and you will eat all the food you want and live in safety in your land. I will grant peace in the land and you will lie down and no one will make you afraid. I will remove savage beasts from the land, and the sword will not pass through your country. You will pursue your enemies and they will fall by the sword before you. Five of you will chase a hundred and a hundred of you will chase ten thousand, and your enemies will fall by the sword before you. I will look on you with favour and make you fruitful and increase your numbers, and I will keep my covenant with you. You will still be eating last year's harvest when you will have to move it out to make room for the new. I will put my dwelling place among you and I will not abhor you. I will walk among you and be your God and you will be my people. I am the Lord your God who brought you out of Egypt so that you would no longer be slaves to the Egyptians; I broke the bars of your yoke and enabled you to walk with heads held high.

The Pentateuch shows that God made promises that would bless the Israelites to the extent that they would be protected from all enemies and would be provided with every necessity for a prosperous and well-ordered lifestyle that would be the envy of surrounding nations. Very specific promises are made in in Leviticus 26:3-10. This is how much God was prepared to do to ensure every aspect of the well-being of the people would be catered for. And once they had a true picture of the personality of God revealed in all that happened at Sinai they were ready to move on to their final destination. Unfortunately, as the rest of the book of Numbers records, when they reached the borders of the Promised Land, they had forgotten or chose to ignore these great promises. They chose to believe the demoralising report of the ten spies, rather than the report of Joshua and Caleb, who insisted with God on their side, they could enter and take the land. As a result, God caused them to wander for another 38 years or so until the first generation who had left Egypt all died. The only exceptions were Joshua and Caleb.

Arrival once again at the Plains of Moab, takes us into the book of Deuteronomy. Deuteronomy is itself a landmark because on a previous occasion I called it Moses' 'state of the nation address'.

Deuteronomy 7:7-9. “The Lord did not set his affection on you and choose you because you were more numerous than other peoples, for you were the fewest of all peoples. But it was because the Lord loved you and kept the oath he swore to your forefathers.....He

ROUTE 66: THE CHRISTIAN WAY

is the faithful God, keeping his covenant of love to a thousand generations of those who love him and keep his commands.”

Deuteronomy 8:2 (NIV) Remember how the Lord your God led you all the way in the wilderness these forty years, to humble and test you in order to know what was in your heart, whether or not you would keep his commands.

The Israelites were now in an enviable position. They were the numerous promised seed of Abraham and they were now poised to enter Canaan the land promised in the covenant with Abraham. The war was already won because God had promised them victory. They had the promise of peace, protection and prosperity for the foreseeable future and beyond. What could have been a more inspiring prospect to motivate the covenant community to fulfil its obligations to God? No nation before or since ever had the potential to become the very life of God on planet earth. So, this was the most appropriate time to reflect on the past 40 years, and that is what the book of Deuteronomy does.

Deuteronomy 10:12-13 (NIV) And now, Israel, what does the Lord your God ask of you but to fear the Lord your God, to walk in obedience to him, to love him, to serve the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul, 13 and to observe the Lord’s commands and decrees that I am giving you today for your own good?

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

It was the time to remind the people of what God’s sovereign power had achieved and to encourage them to rededicate their lives to him. It was a time to remind them of the blessings of obedience and the consequences of disobedience. Already four basic principles of how God will deal with His people have been established. Rebellion in any form of disobedience will be followed with retribution. Repentance will be followed by restoration to the place of blessing. As you read through Deuteronomy, you cannot help but admire how Moses has encapsulated in these words all that is involved in the relationship between God and the Israelites. And that is why to this day Moses himself holds a prominent place on this landmark in his own right.

Deuteronomy 34:10-12 (NIV) Since then, no prophet has risen in Israel like Moses, whom the Lord knew face to face, who did all those signs and wonders the Lord sent him to do in Egypt—to Pharaoh and to all his officials and to his whole land. For no one has ever shown the mighty power or performed the awesome deeds that Moses did in the sight of all Israel.

No one could disagree with this post-mortem assessment of his life. Although Moses made some serious mistakes, he had lived uprightly and carried out God’s commands. Moses died with integrity. God had used him mightily to bring into being a nation that exists to the

ROUTE 66: THE CHRISTIAN WAY

present day. He was their prophet, deliverer, judge, intercessor, military leader, worker of miracles and shepherd of one of the most unruly, rebellious and ungrateful group of people you could ever come across. Great as these achievements are, his greatest function was to act as God's mediating spokesperson. He was the instrument used by God to give His words to the people in the form of the Law, and all the blessings and curses that accompanied obedience or disobedience to it. When the people were listening to Moses, they were listening to God's instructions as to how they should live and how they should express in practical terms their love and gratitude to Him for their deliverance from slavery in Egypt, and their protection and preservation through their wilderness wanderings.

In a very real way, Moses is an Immanuel prototype. His voice signalled God's presence in words. Twelve times, God commands him to 'Tell the Israelites.' On two occasions – Leviticus 22:2 and Numbers 6:23, he is ordered to tell Aaron and his sons. This sets a precedent for here we have the clear indication that the voice of the prophet took precedence over the voice of the priest. In his forth-telling of the word of God, Moses was God's designated prophet. Additional to that was the authority given to him by God to teach His word. There are another 12 references to teaching and learning, the first at the beginning of the journey and ending in the last chapters of Deuteronomy.

Exodus 18:20 (NIV) Teach them his decrees and instructions, and show them the way they are to live and how they are to behave.

Deuteronomy 4:1-8 (NIV) Now, Israel, hear the decrees and laws I am about to teach you. Follow them so that you may live and may go in and take possession of the land the Lord, the God of your ancestors, is giving you. 2 Do not add to what I command you and do not subtract from it, but keep the commands of the Lord your God that I give you.....See, I have taught you decrees and laws as the Lord my God commanded me, so that you may follow them in the land you are entering to take possession of it.

Deuteronomy 31:19 (NIV) Now write down this song and teach it to the Israelites and have them sing it, so that it may be a witness for me against them.

Moses' life ends with a song commemorating God's presence, personality, power and promises; and a blessing on the people to whom He had given this revelation. Together with Genesis, these 4 books lay down the standard by which every person, especially kings and priests, will be measured and judged in the rest of the Old Testament. This section of route 66 is not an easy one to follow. But these landmarks, which have now existed for around three and a half thousand years still remain the foundation upon which Judaism rests today, and are a significant feature of the Christian tenets of faith. They are worth visiting again for they are the key to understanding the course of salvation history that is revealed along route 66, especially when we come to the accounts in Joshua, Judges and Ruth, the next stage of our journey, which tell us what happened when the Israelites entered the Promised Land.