The Drama of Scripture

Forming a Kingdom of Priests
(Exodus 1–Deuteronomy 34)

Keith Mathison provides the following comments that help us understand the transition that is being made as we move from Genesis to the next four books of the Pentateuch.

Within the book of Genesis, chapters 1–11 serve as a prologue to the patriarchal history of 12–50. Within the Pentateuch as a whole, the book of Genesis serves a similar function. It introduces the irrevocable covenant that God made with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. It explains how the sons of Israel came to be in Egypt. It sets the stage, as it were, for the defining moment in Israel’s history, the exodus from Egypt and the giving of the law at Mount Sinai. However, whereas the book of Genesis covers thousands of years of history and centers on the stories of a handful of individuals, the remaining four books of the Pentateuch slow down the narrative pace. The events in these books take place within the lifetime of one man, Moses. Genesis revealed God’s promises to Abraham. The promise of a son has already been fulfilled. The books of Exodus through Deuteronomy reveal God beginning to fulfill the remaining promises.

(From Age to Age: The Unfolding of Biblical Eschatology, Keith A. Mathison, pg. 49)

The authors of The Story of Israel: A Biblical Theology add the following transitional comments.

The book of Genesis traces the story of Israel through one family, Abraham and his descendants. The Israelites as a nation, however, are not introduced until the book of Exodus. The faithfulness that Yahweh shows to the nation stems from his covenant loyalty, established first with the patriarchs. Frequently in the Exodus narrative, Yahweh is depicted as remembering the covenant with the patriarchs (Ex 2:24) or referencing the patriarchs in his self-identification (Ex 4:5). Thus, the story of Israel moves from one family to a nation, but the patriarchal elements serve as foundational to Israel’s development. The first eighteen chapters of Exodus rehearse the story of Israel and their redemption from slavery in Egypt by Yahweh, the God of the patriarchs. It is this redemptive history that becomes central in the issuing of the divine will and the demand for human responsibility.


Gordon Wenham provides this introduction to the book of Exodus.

The book of Exodus takes its usual name from the central event it describes, the exodus (Greek for ‘way out, exit’) of the Israelites from Egypt under the leadership of Moses. Its alternative name, the second book of Moses, is even more appropriate, for Moses is the dominating human figure in the book from beginning to end. Exodus 2 tells of his birth, upbringing in the Egyptian court, and his first attempt to save his fellow countrymen from oppression. In chapter 3 he meets God at the burning bush, and from then on he is always prominent in the story, negotiating with the Pharaoh, leading the people across the Red Sea, receiving the Ten Commandments and numerous other laws, arranging the building of the tabernacle and having it erected. Out of the 770 references to Moses in the whole Old Testament about a third are found in the book of
Exodus. Perhaps the most striking comment on Moses’ role occurs in 14:31 just after the Israelites have escaped from the Egyptian army at the Red Sea, ‘so the people feared the Lord, and they believed in the Lord and in his servant Moses.’ The centrality of Moses to Exodus and the subsequent three books of the Pentateuch fully justifies it being viewed as Torah in the form of a biography of Moses (see Chapter 1, What is the Pentateuch?).

The books of Exodus to Numbers stand apart from the rest of the Pentateuch in the way that they focus on the life of Moses. Genesis illuminates the setting for Moses’ career, while Deuteronomy offers Moses’ own reflections on his achievements and his hopes and fears for the nation’s future. But the books of Exodus to Numbers relate all the major events in his life, apart from the last few days before his death, with special attention being given to his mediation of the law. The two longest books, Exodus and Numbers, which mix law and narrative, flank the central book Leviticus, which is almost entirely law. But the introductions to each section of Leviticus, ‘And the Lord said to Moses’, and the episodes in chapters 8–10 and 24 remind the reader that Leviticus too is really a narrative about the giving of the law to Moses.


Wenham goes on to provide an outline of the remaining four books of the Pentateuch. His outline provides us with a sense of the overall structure of these books that convey the unfolding drama of Scripture. Remember that the narrative found in these four books is showing us how God is fulfilling his promises to Abraham and, in so doing, is working out His plan of redemption and restoration. He is forming the nation of Israel that He has chosen to be the people through whom He will bless the nations of the world. He will accomplish this mission by showing the world what it means for a people to be in covenant relationship with Him and by eventually bringing into the world through these people the offspring of Eve that will crush the head of the serpent.

Exodus

Part 1 Slavery in Egypt and liberation 1:1–18:27
- Slavery and genocide 1:1–22
- Moses’ birth and upbringing 2:1–22
- Moses’ mission 2:23–4:31
- Negotiating with Pharaoh 5:1–7:13
- The Plagues 7:14–11:10
- Exodus from Egypt 12:1–15:21
- Journey to Sinai 15:22–18:27

Part 2 The law-giving 19:1–24:18
- Revelation at Mount Sinai 19:1–20:21
- Making of the Covenant 24:1–18

Part 3 The tabernacle 25:1–40:38
- Directions for constructing the tabernacle 25:1–31:18
- Making the golden calf 32:1–34:35
- Construction of the tabernacle 35:1–40:38
Leviticus

Part 1  Laws on sacrifice  1:1–7:38
  Instructions for the laity  1:1–6:7
  Instructions for the priests  6:8–7:38

Part 2  Institution of the Priesthood  8:1–10:20

Part 3  Uncleanness and its treatment  11:1–16:34

Part 4  Prescriptions for practical holiness  17:1–27:34

Numbers

Part 1  Israel prepares to enter the promised land  1:1–10:10
  Censuses  1:1–4:49
  Cleansing of the camp  5:1–6:27
  Offerings for the altar  7:1–89
  Dedication of the Levites  8:1–26
  The second Passover  9:1–23
  The silver trumpets  10:1–10

Part 2  Journey from Sinai to Kadesh  10:11–12:16
  Departure in battle order  10:11–36
  Three complaints  11:1–12:16

Part 3  Forty years near Kadesh  13:1–19:22
  The rebellion of the spies  13:1–14:45
  Laws on offerings  15:1–41
  Prerogatives of the priests  16:1–18:32
  Laws on cleansing  19:1–22

Part 4  Journey from Kadesh to the Plains of Moab  20:1–22:1

Part 5  In the Plains of Moab  22:1–19:22
  Balaam and Balak  22:1–24:25
  National apostasy  25:1–18
  Census  26:1–65
  Laws about land, offerings and vows  27:1–30:16
  Defeat of Midian and settlement of Transjordan  31:1–32:42
  List of camp sites  33:1–49
  Laws about land  33:50–36:13

Deuteronomy

Part 1  Heading  1:1–5

Part 2  First Sermon  1:6–4:43
  Reflections on journey from Horeb to Moab  1:6–3:29
  Israel’s duty of obedience  4:1–40
  Cities of refuge appointed  4:41–43

Part 3  Heading  4:44–49

Part 4  Second Sermon  5:1–28:69
  The giving of the Ten Commandments  5:1–33
  The challenge of loving God with the whole heart  6:1–11:32
  Exposition of the Law  12:1–26:19
  Ratifying the covenant on entry to the Land  27:1–26
  Blessings and curses  28:1–68
Exodus

Because the Pentateuch is a single literary unit, each of its five books must be understood in relation to the others. Peter Enns helpfully suggests that Exodus be read as one of five chapters of a single book, rather than as a separate isolated book. It is a record of one stage in the larger history of Israel recounted in the Pentateuch. It is a “sequel” to Genesis. The connection between the two books is clear. In Genesis 15:13, God had revealed to Abraham that his descendants would be afflicted in a foreign land for four hundred years. In Genesis 50:24, Joseph had told his brothers in Egypt that God would deliver them and bring them to the land he had promised to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob (cf. Gen. 46:4). Genesis, then, anticipates Exodus, and Exodus continues the story begun in Genesis.

The book of Exodus does not have the same kind of obvious structural markers found in Genesis, but it may be divided into three major sections. In Exodus 1–18, God redeems Israel from bondage in Egypt. In chapters 19–24, God gives Israel the law at Mount Sinai. In chapters 25–40, God prepares Israel for his holy presence by providing instructions for the tabernacle and for the priesthood. The first eighteen chapters of Exodus, then, are primarily historical narrative. Chapters 19–40, on the other hand, are primarily a record of the laws and instructions that God gave to Israel at Mount Sinai. Throughout the book as a whole, there are a number of significant eschatological themes.

Though Exodus offers several major themes and subthemes one idea dominates and makes all others possible, even necessary: there is only one God. This one God is the same God who led Joseph, Jacob and the rest of the chosen family into Egypt. Thus this is the same God who created the earth and human race. By the midpoint of Exodus this one God demonstrates an ongoing commitment to promises made hundreds of years earlier, an ability to deliver a numerous but weak and enslaved people from a powerful and oppressive ruler, a willingness to work with a fearsome yet fearful leader (Moses), the foolishness of worshiping humanly manufactured gods and a desire to communicate beneficial standards to the newly freed nation. At this
midpoint God declares all other deities invalid and commands exclusive worship of himself (Ex 20:1–11). Perhaps no other declaration was as revolutionary in the ancient world or is in today’s postmodern, pluralistic world. This statement of uniqueness explains how it is that God can choose Israel, deliver Israel, make covenant with Israel and call Israel to teach God’s ways to other nations. Simply stated, there is no other deity to stop, rebuke, or oppose God, and it is this “simple” theological issue that Moses attempts to teach the ancient audience and that constitutes the foundation for the Bible’s enduring message for today. (Old Testament Theology, Paul R. House, pg. 88)

…Israel’s great need begins the book, which concludes with the nation about to embark on the march to the Promised Land, led by the manifested presence of God. The book ends with a discussion of the community at worship. More than one-third of Exodus (chaps. 25–31; 35–40) is devoted to the establishment of Israel’s cultic framework, in particular to the erection of, and the regulations for the use of, Israel’s tabernacle. This is no meaningless cultic digression, but emphasizes the goal of the exodus and the importance of a worshipful response in Israel’s continuing covenantal relationship.

The general contours of the Book of Exodus are erected around this movement from slavery to the concluding picture of worship. The transition from slavery to worship is accomplished through a very great redemption, which is at the center of the book. Basic to all of Israel’s later theology is the redemption of the exodus. (The Faith of Israel: A Theological Survey of the Old Testament, Second Ed., William J. Dumbrell, pg. 32)

There are three prominent theological subjects in the book of Exodus that also nicely cover the full scope and message of this second of the five books of the Torah. The three subjects are divine redemption, divine morality, and divine worship. As a whole, Exodus contains some of the richest, most foundational theology in all the Old Testament. (The Promise-Plan of God: A Biblical Theology of the Old and New Testaments, Walter C. Kaiser Jr., pg. 68)

God’s Redemption of Israel (Ex. 1–18)
The book of Exodus begins where the book of Genesis ends, with the sons of Israel in Egypt. However, when the book of Exodus begins, Israel has been in Egypt for over four hundred years (Ex. 12:40). They have multiplied greatly, demonstrating that God is already fulfilling his promises to Abraham (Ex. 1:7; Gen. 13:16; 15:5; 22:17). Their great numbers, however, initiate a chain of events leading to the exodus. As the book of Exodus begins, Joseph is long dead, and Egypt is under a new Pharaoh. He sees Israel’s great numbers as a threat (Ex. 1:9). Israel is, therefore, forced into slavery in Egypt and suffers greatly. The oppression of Israel does not however, stop their multiplication (1:12). Because of this, Pharaoh instructs the midwives to kill all newborn Israelite males (1:15–16). When this plan too is thwarted, Pharaoh commands the Egyptian people to drown all newborn Hebrew males in the Nile (1:22). Pharaoh has thus set himself against God’s people and against God’s plan.
Exodus 2 introduces us to Moses. He is born into the tribe of Levi (2:1–2), and from the moment of his birth he is in danger because of the genocidal decrees of Pharaoh. In order to save her infant son, his mother builds a small basket and hides him among the reeds in the river. In a truly ironic twist, he is rescued by the daughter of Pharaoh, and his own biological mother is made his nurse (2:3–10). The daughter of Pharaoh names this Hebrew boy Moses. The book of Exodus does not reveal anything further about Moses’ early years. Instead it moves to a point of crisis in Moses’ life after he has reached adulthood. One day, he witnesses an Egyptian beating a Hebrew, and he kills the Egyptian (2:11–12). Moses soon discovers that what he has done has become known to the people and to Pharaoh, so he flees from Egypt into the land of Midian where he settles and marries (2:13–22).

In Stephen’s speech before the Sanhedrin some 1500 years after Moses, he summarized Moses’s life in the following way:

At that time Moses was born, and he was no ordinary child. For three months he was cared for in his father’s house. When he was placed outside, Pharaoh’s daughter took him and brought him up as her own son. Moses was educated in all the wisdom of the Egyptians and was powerful in speech and action. When Moses was forty years old, he decided to visit his fellow Israelites. He saw one of them being mistreated by an Egyptian, so he went to his defense and avenged him by killing the Egyptian. Moses thought that his own people would realize that God was using him to rescue them, but they did not. The next day Moses came upon two Israelites who were fighting. He tried to reconcile them by say, “Men, you are brothers; why do you want to hurt each other?” “But the man who was mistreating the other pushed Moses aside and said, ‘Who made you ruler and judge over us? Do you want to kill me as you killed the Egyptian yesterday?’ When Moses heard this, he fled to Midian, where he settled as a foreigner and had two sons. “After forty years had passed, an angel appeared to Moses in the flames of a burning bush in the desert near Mount Sinai. When he saw this, he was amazed at the sight. As he went over to look more closely, he heard the Lord’s voice: ‘I am the God of your fathers, the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob.’ Moses trembled with fear and did not dare to look. “Then the Lord said to him, ‘Take off your sandals; the place where you are standing is holy ground. I have indeed seen the oppression of my people in Egypt. I have heard their groaning and have come down to set them free. Now come, I will send you back to Egypt. “This is the same Moses whom they had rejected with the words, ‘Who made you ruler and judge?’ He was sent to be their ruler and deliverer by God himself,
through the angel who appeared to him in the bush. He led them out of Egypt and did wonders and miraculous signs in Egypt, at the Red Sea and for forty years in the desert. (Acts 7:20–36)

Eventually, Pharaoh dies, but the suffering and oppression of the people of Israel continue, and they cry out for rescue (2:23). The response to this cry is crucial for an understanding of the book of Exodus: “God heard their groaning, and God remembered his covenant with Abraham, with Isaac, and with Jacob” (2:24). What this means is that the coming redemption of Israel from Egypt is grounded in the already existing Abrahamic covenant. God had specifically promised the salvation of Israel from Egyptian bondage in his covenant with Abraham (Gen. 15:13–14). Now he is about to fulfill that promise.

Exodus 3:1–4:17 tells the story of the call of Moses. The angel of the Lord appears to Moses in a burning bush at Mount Horeb/Sinai (3:1–2). As one who is both distinguished from God and yet equated with God (v. 4), the angel of the Lord prefigures Jesus Christ (see John 1:1). God reveals himself to Moses as “the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob” (Ex. 3:6). On the basis of Jesus’ use of these words in Matthew 22:31–32, R. Alan Cole notes that this text, “early and unselfconscious though it is, is the beginning of the revelation of life after death.” The truth about the afterlife, hinted at here, is progressively revealed throughout Scripture.

God tells Moses that he has seen the affliction of his people in Egypt and that he has come down to deliver them and bring them up to Canaan (Ex. 3:7–8). He commissions Moses to go to Pharaoh in order to bring the people out of Egypt (vv. 9–12). Moses then asks what he should tell the people of Israel if they should ask the name of the God who has sent him to them (v. 13). What is God’s response? “God said to Moses, ‘I Am Who I Am.” And he said, ‘Say this to the people of Israel, ‘Yahweh, the God of your fathers, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob, has sent me to you.’ This is my name forever, and thus I am to be remembered throughout all generations” (v. 15). The God who is present with Israel is the God who is, and he is the God of their fathers. Despite Moses’ protestations, God sends him to Egypt to deliver his people from slavery (3:15–4:17).

…The assurance of the divine presence for Israel permeates the context. The previous chapter closed with the assurance that the God of the covenant with the patriarchs was well aware of the Israelite situation: Elohim was the one who remembered the covenant with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. When Moses sees the burning bush, these facts are repeated and then he is told God is going to deliver the people and fulfil the promise of land to the patriarchs: ‘I have come to deliver them from Egypt and bring them to a good and spacious land, a land flowing with milk and honey’ (Exod. 3:8).

Two factors emphasize the presence of God. First, God is in covenant with Israel, and this covenant implies the Abrahamic promise that Israel can expect deliverance. The second point confirms the first. For the burning-bush sign – the miraculous fire – is meant to evoke the memory of the covenant with the pieces, when the divine fire
passed between the animal carcasses, assuring Abraham that foreign oppression of his descendants would end after 400 years of exile (Gen. 15:13). Then they would be rescued and brought back to the land of promise. God appears in fire in Exodus 3 to indicate to Moses that chronos has now become kairos. Exile is almost over.

(NSBT, Dominion and Dynasty: A Theology of the Hebrew Bible, Stephen G. Dempster, pp. 95–96)

Moses returns to Egypt, and he and his brother Aaron declare to the people of Israel that God has seen their affliction and will soon deliver them (4:18–31). He has been instructed to tell Pharaoh to release Israel, God’s “firstborn son,” and to tell him that if he refuses to let Israel go, God will kill his firstborn son (vv. 22–23). When Moses demands Israel’s release, however, Pharaoh refuses and oppresses Israel even more harshly (5:1–19). The Israelites complain bitterly to Moses, initiating a pattern that continues throughout the book of Exodus (5:20–21; 6:9–12; 14:11–12; 15:24; 16; 17:1–7; 32). Despite their complaints, God remains faithful to his promise to deliver Israel (6:1–13), a promise that is grounded in his covenant with Abraham. Pharaoh’s refusal to let Israel go, however, initiates a series of plagues that God sends in judgment upon Egypt (chs. 7–12). [These plagues are more than a judgment upon Egypt, however. They are also a judgment upon Egypt’s false gods (Ex. 12:12; Num. 33:4).]

When Moses goes to Pharaoh to accomplish the deliverance in the divine name, Pharaoh asks him, ‘Who is Yahweh that I should listen to his voice?’ (Exod. 5:2). The rest of the narrative answers this question. Yahweh is the God of creation (Gen. 1), and this Yahweh Elohim is in covenant with a particular people (Gen. 2). This is made clear in the subsequent storyline. In the account of the seventh plague there is the statement that the Egyptians still have not ‘connected the dots’. They do not yet know what Israel knows: that Yahweh is God. Since this is the case there is no obstacle that can stand in his way of fulfilling his covenant with his people. Egypt and Israel are constantly presented with proof of the divine identity in the account of the plagues and their aftermath.

(NSBT, Dominion and Dynasty: A Theology of the Hebrew Bible, Stephen G. Dempster, pp. 96–97)

The literary structure of Exodus divides the plagues into three groups of three. The tenth and final plague is a climax to the entire series. The first three series of judgments involves plagues of blood, frogs, and gnats (7:1–8:19). The second series involves plagues of flies, the death of livestock, and boils (8:20–9:12). The third series involves plagues of hail, locusts and darkness (9:13–10:29). In several of these plagues, God specifically distinguishes between the people of Israel and the people of Egypt (8:23; 9:4, 26; 10:23). However, despite God’s demonstration of his power, Pharaoh continues to harden his heart and refuses to let Israel go. His refusal sets the stage for the tenth and final plague.

The description of the tenth plague is different in that it is intimately connected with the institution of the Passover. Exodus 11:1–13:16, therefore, should be understood as a single unit of text. In Exodus 11, God reveals to Moses that after the final plague Pharaoh will let Israel go (v. 1). God tells Moses that he is going to come in person into the midst of Egypt and that every firstborn will die, but God reassures Moses that he will make a distinction between Egypt and Israel (vv. 4–7). As Alec Motyer
explains, “when Yahweh entered Egypt as absolute Lord and Judge, Israel’s problem was no longer how to escape Pharaoh but how to be safe before such a God.”

In chapter 12, God gives Moses the instructions for the Passover ceremony that will distinguish Israel from Egypt. God tells Moses that this month will now be the first month of the year for Israel (v. 2). This night will commemorate Israel’s birth as a nation. Each household is to take a lamb without blemish and keep it until the fourteenth day of the month at which point it shall be killed (vv. 3–6). The lamb’s blood is then to be placed on the doorposts and lintels of the houses, and the families in the houses are to eat the roasted flesh of the lamb (vv. 7–11). God tells Moses that on this night he will pass through Egypt and strike down the firstborn of the Egyptians, but he will pass over the houses marked with the sign of the lamb’s blood (vv. 12–13). In earlier plagues, the Lord had distinguished between Egypt and Israel without any action on the part of Israel. Now Israel “must take a stand, self-declared as the people under the blood of the lamb.” The Passover lamb, then, becomes a substitute for Israel, God’s firstborn son (cf. 4:22; 1 Cor. 5:7).

In Exodus 12:14–20, God instructs Israel regarding how to commemorate this redemptive event throughout her generations. On the appointed day, Moses commands the people of Israel to do as the Lord had instructed them and to kill the Passover lamb (vv. 21–28). At midnight God himself comes into Egypt and strikes down every firstborn in Egypt including the firstborn of Pharaoh (vv. 29–30; cf. 4:22–23). Pharaoh summons Moses and Aaron and finally consents to let Israel go (vv. 33–42). [The exact dating of the exodus from Egypt is disputed among historians. Some argue for a date in the thirteenth century B.C. Others, including the present author, believe the exodus occurred in the fifteenth century B.C. If 1 Kings 6:1 is taken literally (and there is no compelling reason why it should not be), a date in the fifteenth century is required.) God then gives Moses final instructions regarding the Passover, telling him that no foreigner may partake of it unless he is circumcised. Those foreigners who are circumcised shall be considered as a native of the land (vv. 43–51).

When viewed against the wider context of the biblical storyline, the subsequent account of the ten plagues is another expression of the battle between the seeds, which culminates in the Passover. Israeliite firstborn males are spared while those in Egypt are not. If the Passover is a sacrifice, it is the first one since the act of Abraham in Genesis 22. Similarly, the Passover rite suggests substitutionary death. A male yearling sheep or goat is slain and its blood spattered on the doorposts and lintels of an Israelite dwelling in order to save the firstborn child from death. In contrast to the destruction of Hebrew children during the beginning of Pharaonic oppression (Exod. 1:22), this time the firstborn of the seed of promise are saved from death by virtue of a sacrifice while the firstborn children of the seed of the Pharaoh are dealt a death blow. Significantly, it is only this final blow that brings about final liberation from oppression in Egypt. The firstborn son of the Pharaoh was destined to rule but instead it is the firstborn son of Yahweh who will have dominion.

It is at this point that the parallel between the destruction of the Egyptian firstborn and the sparing of the Israeliite firstborn should be clarified. That the Passover rite is important in the narrative is an understatement. In fact, there is a pause in the text
between the prediction of the Passover and its fulfillment. A lengthy didactic text is inserted, which gives instructions for the Passover to later Israelites (Exod. 12:1–28).

…

The Passover is the *climax* in a titanic battle that is waged between the God of Israel and the gods of Egypt. In the plagues of Egypt there are four stages to the battle, with three trios of judgment. The sequence of natural disasters is laden with theological overtones; it is as if all creation is becoming unhinged. The critical question is: who is in charge? Pharaoh and his magicians or Moses? Pharaoh’s gods or the God of Israel? Lurking in the background is Pharaoh’s question at the beginning of the battle: ‘Who is Yahweh that I should listen to his voice’ (Exod. 5:2)? Yahweh is none other than the Creator (Elohim).

At the end of the first trio (Exod. 7:14–8:19 [MT 8:15]) the magicians of Egypt are forced to admit the superior power of Yahweh. At the end of the second series, in which a distinction is made between Israel and Egypt, again the magicians are forced to recognize Yahweh’s power. In the final sequence, which concludes with the plague of darkness (9:13–10:29), Pharaoh confesses his guilt and sin. Moreover, as many scholars note, during the first five plagues Pharaoh appears to be in control, hardening his heart himself and therefore causing Yahweh’s wrath to bring about the plagues. But during the last five it is Yahweh who hardens the heart of Pharaoh, bringing about his own will in history. It is the tenth plague that is the climactic one, the Passover and the destruction of the Egyptian firstborn. It results in liberation for slaves. When the Egyptians change their mind and try to recapture the Israelites, they are drowned in beneath the waters of the Reed Sea while their slaves emerge on the other side unscathed, a people created by God (Exod. 15:16). The question of control has been answered.

(NSBT, *Dominion and Dynasty: A Theology of the Hebrew Bible*, Stephen G. Dempster, pp. 98–99)

Exodus 13 describes the consecration of all the firstborn of Israel, the feast of unleavened bread, and God’s guidance of Israel through the wilderness by means of a pillar of cloud by day and fire by night. Exodus 14 then tells of Israel’s crossing of the Red Sea and the destruction of the pursuing Egyptian armies. The redemption of Israel from Egypt is celebrated in song in Exodus 15. God is there described as a warrior fighting for Israel (15:3). Throughout the remainder of the Old Testament, the exodus event is seen as the birth of the nation of Israel, as a paradigm of God’s past and future saving acts, and as a permanent part of Israel’s self-identity. The covenantal unity of the people is such that later generations are spoken to as if they were the ones who experienced the exodus event firsthand (see, e.g., Amos 2:10; 3:1).

**God’s Law for Israel (Ex. 19–24)**

Three months after the exodus, the people of Israel finally arrive at Mount Sinai (19:1–2; cf. 3:12). They will remain there for almost a year (Num. 10:11). The Sinai narrative is central to the Pentateuch. It occupies a total of a little over fifty-eight chapters (Ex. 19–Num. 10:10). There are sixty-eight chapters preceding the Sinai narrative in the Pentateuch and a little over 60 chapters following it. The events that occur at Sinai, therefore, occupy approximately the entire middle third of the Torah.
In the Israelite celebration of their liberation, the goal of this liberation is revealed clearly and it is both geographical and theological. The goal of the journey out of Egypt is to relocate Israel in the land of promise in fulfillment of the Abrahamic covenant. … The goal is never left out of sight – so that ‘you might bring them and plant them in the mountain of your inheritance, the place of your dwelling that you made, O Lord, the sanctuary your hands have established’ (Exod. 15:16–17). The goal of Exodus is thus the building of the Edenic sanctuary so that the Lord can dwell with his people, just as he once was Yahweh Elohim to the first human beings.

After the exodus narrative the Israelites move to Mount Sinai. Mount Sinai stands in the way of Canaan, the land of their inheritance, but it is certainly no diversion, nor is it incidental. The centrality of this mountain is shown by a number of narrative signals. First, and most obvious is the virtual suspension of narrative pace. Israel stays at Sinai for eleven months in real time (Exod. 19:1–Num. 10:11) and fifty-seven chapters in narrative time. This is important given the fact that sixty-eight chapters precede Sinai and fifty-nine chapters follow it. Sinai is central to the Torah.

The narrative is virtually suspended. Legal and cultic instruction as well as cultic description supply the main content with brief narrative accounts interspersed (Exod. 19: 20:18–26; 24; 32–34; 40:34–38; Lev. 8–10; 24:10–23). Obviously, this material is extremely important. One way the narrator highlights this importance is to place at the beginning of it the very words of God, his ipsumima verba, his ten words of direct communication to the Israelites (Exod. 20:1–17). He speaks directly to the Israelites from the fire on the mountain just as he spoke directly to Moses from the fire of the bush by the same mountain.

The covenant with Israel at Sinai is the focus of this content. At Sinai, Israel enters into a covenant with God that seems different from the covenant with the patriarchs; it is a covenant marked by specific conditions for both parties. Obedience leads to blessing and fullness of life; disobedience to curse and death.

The purpose of this covenant is that an obedient Israel may bring God’s creation blessing to the world. If Israel obeys the divine commandments, it will become God’s ‘treasured possession among all the peoples’, ‘a kingdom of priests’ and ‘a holy nation’ (Exod. 19:5–6). All these terms are connected with nationhood. Two of the terms are very closely related, the first and third. A ‘treasured possession’ suggests a personal article of movable property with an immense value. It can even be compared with a father’s concern for a son (Mal. 3:17). This distinguishes Israel from all the nations that also belong to the Lord (Exod. 19:5). A ‘holy nation’ means a nation set apart by its holiness or its service to God. If Israel becomes a holy nation, it will ‘image’ God to the nations. The final phase designates Israel as a particular type of kingdom. Instead of being a kingdom of a particular king, it will be a kingdom marked by priesthood; that is, service of God on behalf of people and vice versa. It will be ‘a kingdom run not by politicians depending upon strength and connivance but by priests depending upon faith in Yahweh, a servant nation instead of a ruling nation’ (Durham 1987: 263). Israel will thus redefine the meaning of dominion – service. This will be its distinctive task, its distinguishing characteristic among the world of nations. It will reclaim the lost dominion of humanity.
After arriving at Sinai, Moses ascends the mountain, and in Exodus 19:4–6, God tells him what to say to Israel: “You yourselves have seen what I did to the Egyptians, and how I bore you on eagles’ wings and brought you to myself. Now therefore, if you will indeed obey my voice and keep my covenant, you shall be my treasured possession among all peoples, for all the earth is mine; and you shall be to me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.” God has kept the promises he made to Abraham concerning his people. He has now made of Abraham a great nation (cf. Gen. 12:2). He has now brought that nation up out of Egypt (cf. Gen. 15:13–14). This great nation is now to be a kingdom of priests and a holy nation. As a holy nation, Israel is to demonstrate through her holiness what it means to be God’s people. As a kingdom of priests, Israel is also to be a mediator of God’s blessing to the nations (Deut. 4:6–8).

The words “for all the earth is mine” in Exodus 19:5 are important because they indicate the purpose for which Israel was chosen. As William Dumbrell explains, “Such a concept would draw us back to the intent of the Abrahamic covenant which this section restates, namely that Israel is the agent used by God to achieve the wider purposes which the Abrahamic covenant entails, purposes which involve the redemption of the whole world.” We recall that God’s creational purpose involved the establishment of his kingdom throughout the earth. The nation of Israel is to be a manifestation of God’s kingdom in one small corner of the earth as well as a type of the worldwide eschatological kingdom that he will later establish. God is to be Israel’s King, and Israel is to be his people.

It is important to remember that God has already made a covenant with the people of Israel in the covenant he made with Abraham and his offspring. The giving of the law in the following chapters of Exodus does not annul or replace the Abrahamic covenant (Gal. 3:15–20). God had promised Abraham that he would make him a great nation (Gen. 12:2). Now that Israel, the offspring of Abraham, is a great nation, God will give the law that Israel will need as a nation under his reign. The law will serve a number of functions. It will serve, for example, as a “guardian” until Messiah comes (Gal. 3:24–25). The law will also define “the holiness demanded of the covenant people.” The Abrahamic covenant promised the realm and the people for the kingdom of priests. The Mosaic covenant provides the law for this manifestation of the kingdom as well as the tabernacle for the presence of the divine King.

Moses sets before the people of Israel all that God reveals to him, and the people promise that they will do these things (Ex. 19:7–8). God then tells Moses to consecrate the people because he is going to “come down on Mount Sinai in the sight of all the people” (v. 11). The people are to prepare for the coming of the Lord. On the third day, a loud trumpet blast sounds, and God descends on the mountain in smoke and fire (vv. 16–20). This is a crucial theophany in the Old Testament, and it is continued in Exodus 20.

In Exodus 20:1–17, God reveals the Decalogue, the Ten Commandments. The prologue to the commandments in verse 2 is significant. God says, “I am Yahweh your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery.” As
Motyer explains, “The people were given the law not in order that they might become the redeemed, rather it was because they had already been redeemed that they were given the law.” God had graciously redeemed Israel from Egypt because, as O. Palmer Robertson notes, Israel “already was in a covenantal relationship with the Lord through Abraham.” The law, then, expresses God’s will for Israel at this point in her history. It was the tool God would use to teach Israel how to live as a holy people in his presence. And because it expressed the nature of God, Israel’s obedience to the law was to be a witness to the nations of God’s holy character (Deut. 4:6–7; Ps. 147:20).

It is important to note that the Israelites are God’s people from the beginning of the book of Exodus (see “my people” in Ex 3:7 and often; “my [firstborn] son” in Ex 4:22–23), rooted in the covenant with Abraham (Ex 2:24; 6:4–5). Israel does not become God’s people after the sea crossing or in the making of the covenant at Sinai. Of what import, then, is the latter covenant? The covenant at Sinai is a vocational covenant within the context of the Abrahamic covenant (note that Moses appeals to the latter when the former has been broken, Ex 32:13). The vocational covenant is defined in Exodus 19:5–6: Israel is to be a priestly kingdom and a holy nation. Israel is set apart not only from other people but for a specific purpose in relation to those nations, for, as God says, “the whole earth is mine” (see Ex 9:29; 1 Pet 2:9 picks up on this understanding).

The covenant at Sinai is made with God’s elect people, and the law is a gift to an already-redeemed community. The law is not a means by which the relationship with God is established (or reestablished). Israel’s obedience of the law, while certainly in the best interests of its own life and community, is finally in service of the vocation to which it has been called by God (Ex 19:5–6; cf. Deut 4:6).


The first four commandments explain God’s will for Israel’s relationship with himself. The first commandment forbids the worship of any other gods (Ex. 20:3). The second commandment forbids idolatry (vv. 4–6). The third commandment forbids the misuse of God’s holy name (v. 7). The fourth commandment requires Israel to observe the seventh day as a Sabbath (vv. 8–11). The final six commandments explain God’s will for social relationships. The fifth commandment requires the honoring of parents (v. 12). The sixth commandment forbids murder (v. 13). The seventh commandment forbids adultery (v. 14). The eighth commandment forbids theft (v. 15). The ninth commandment forbids the bearing of false witness against a neighbor (v. 16). Finally, the tenth commandment forbids covetousness (v. 17).

Exodus 20:22–23:33 is commonly referred to as the Book of the Covenant. This section of Scripture contains a number of laws on a diverse range of subjects including altars (20:22–26), slaves (21:1–11), restitution (21:33–22:15), social justice (22:16–23:9), and the Sabbath (23:10–12). Exodus 24 then narrates the story of the confirmation of the covenant. After Moses reveals all the words of God to the people, they answer in unison, “All the words that Yahweh has spoken, we will do” (24:3). Burnt offerings and peace offerings are sacrificed, and the blood is sprinkled on the
altar (vv. 4–6). Moses then reads the Book of the Covenant to the people, who agree once again to do what the Lord has required. He then sprinkles blood on them, saying, “Behold the blood of the covenant that Yahweh has made with you in accordance with all these words” (vv. 7–8). Moses, Aaron, Nadab, Abihu, and seventy elders of Israel then ascend the mountain and partake of a covenant meal in the presence of the Lord (vv. 9–11).

The law of God is “holy and righteous and good” (Rom. 7:12; Ps. 119). But the true nature and purpose of the law were not always understood in Israel. Those who believed that men were redeemed by keeping the law misunderstood the law. God gave the law to a people he had already graciously redeemed. The law described the righteousness that God required of this already redeemed nation. It explained what it meant for his people to be a holy nation and a kingdom of priests. In doing so, it also revealed sin (Rom. 3:20; 7:7). Those who rejected the transitory nature of the Mosaic administration also misunderstood it. The law was a guardian until Christ came (Gal. 3:19, 24). As Robertson explains, many Israelites were so impressed with the real glories of God’s law that they became blind “to the temporary character of the Mosaic administration of law.” The law pointed forward to Christ, and it is only in Christ that we understand the law’s true nature, purpose, and goal.

God’s Tabernacle in Israel (Ex. 25–40)

The remaining chapters of Exodus focus primarily on the tabernacle. Exodus 25–31 contains God’s instructions to Moses regarding the plans for the tabernacle. Chapters 35–40 contain the record of its actual construction. Between these two accounts is the story of Israel’s idolatrous worship of the golden calf and the renewal of the covenant following this act of rebellion (Ex. 32–34). The importance of the tabernacle for Israel rests in the fact that it was to be a sanctuary for the presence of the divine King in the midst of Israel, his kingdom of priests and holy nation. It was the place where God would dwell among his chosen people (Ex. 25:8; 29:45–46). It is important to recognize the relationship between the law and the tabernacle. The tabernacle, along with its priesthood and sacrifices, was part of the law revealed through Moses. God’s provision of the tabernacle in this context meant that “those who were called to obey had at the centre of their life an established availability of grace to cater for their lapses from obedience.” The sacrifices available in the tabernacle, however, were only shadows. They could not, in themselves, take away sin (Heb. 10:4).

Exodus 25–31, which outlines God’s instructions for the tabernacle, contains seven distinct sections. Each begins with the words “Yahweh said to Moses…” (25:1; 30:11, 17, 22, 34; 31:1, 12). The seventh such section contains instructions regarding the Sabbath. This may be an attempt by the author to connect the tabernacle with the creation narrative in Genesis 1:1–2:3. Others have noted similarities between the tabernacle and the garden of Eden. T. D. Alexander, for example, observes that God walks in Eden as he does in the tabernacle (Gen. 3:8; Lev. 26:12; Deut. 23:14; 2 Sam. 7:6–7); that Eden and the later sanctuaries are both entered from the east and guarded by cherubim (Gen. 3:24; Ex. 25:18–22; 26:31; 1 Kings 6:23–29); that the lampstand is possibly a symbol for the tree of life (Gen. 2:9; 3:22; Ex. 25:31–35); that the verbs used in God’s command to work and take care of the garden (Gen. 2:15) are used in
combination elsewhere in the Pentateuch only to describe the duties of the Levites in the sanctuary (Num. 3:7–8; 8:26; 18:5–6); that the river flowing from Eden (Gen. 2:10) is similar to the river seen flowing from the future temple in Ezekiel 47:1–12; and that the gold and onyx found in the garden (Gen. 2:11–12) are used in Exodus (25:7, 11, 17, 31) to decorate the sanctuary and the priestly garments. Noting these kinds of parallels, John Sailhamer describes the tabernacle as “a reconstruction of God’s good creation.”

According to Exodus 25:9, Moses is instructed to build the tabernacle according to the pattern that God will reveal to him (25:40; 26:30; 27:8). The tabernacle, then, is a symbol that points to a greater reality. As Hebrews 8:5 explains, the tabernacle is “a copy and shadow of the heavenly things.” Vern Poythress suggests that “the tabernacle as a whole is a replica of heaven.” Gregory Beale, however, argues that the Holy of Holies alone specifically represents the heavenly dwelling place of God and that the tabernacle as a whole symbolically represents the entire cosmos. Beale also argues that the tabernacle serves a specific eschatological purpose in that it was “designed to point to the cosmic eschatological reality that God’s tabernacling presence, formerly limited to the holy of holies, was to be extended throughout the whole earth.” What is beyond question is that the tabernacle “showed what God was like and what was needed to deal with sin.” At the very least, then, we may affirm that the tabernacle foreshadows the redemptive work of the Messiah.

The tabernacle is divided into three sections. At the center is the Most Holy Place, a room measuring 10 cubits by 10 cubits. It contains the ark of the covenant (Ex. 25:10–22; 26:34). Separated from the Most Holy Place by a veil is the Holy Place, a room measuring 10 cubits by 20 cubits and containing the table for bread, the golden lampstand, and the altar of incense (26:33–35; see also 25:23–40; 30:1–10). The Most Holy Place and the Holy Place are within a tent, and surrounding this tent is a courtyard measuring 50 cubits by 100 cubits (27:9–19). The courtyard contains the bronze altar (27:1–8) and the bronze basin for washing (30:17–21). At the east end of the courtyard is the entrance (27:16).

The sacrifices that are to be made on the bronze altar “are the means for cleansing and removing defilement of the people of the tabernacle itself.” They maintain the holiness of God’s people. The sacrifices also pointed forward to the final sacrifice that would be made by Christ (Heb. 9:11–10:18). The instructions for the priesthood are found in Exodus 28–29. These men served as mediators between God and the people of Israel. As such they prefigured Christ, pointing forward to the one ideal high priest and mediator between God and man (Heb. 4:14–5:10; 7:11–8:13; 1 Tim. 2:5).

In the final part of the section regarding the tabernacle, God provides further instructions concerning the Sabbath (Ex. 31:12–18). God tells Moses that the Sabbath is to be “a sign forever between me and the people of Israel” (v. 17). Just as God made circumcision the sign of his covenant with Abraham, he makes the Sabbath a sign of the Sinai covenant with Israel (vv. 13, 16–17).

While Moses is on the mountain receiving the instructions for the tabernacle, the people of Israel commit a grave sin. Exodus 32–34 recounts the story of the golden calf. Because of the amount of time Moses had been on the mountain, the people ask Aaron
to make gods for them (32:1). Aaron then fashions a calf of gold and declares a feast
day (vv. 2–6). The people of Israel, in effect, are creating their own false religion and
breaking at least the first three of the Ten Commandments. Their rebellion almost
results in their complete destruction at the hand of God, but Moses intercedes on their
behalf and has all who participated in the idolatrous worship put to death (vv. 7–35).
God is merciful to the people, and he renews the covenant that Israel has broken (Ex.
34). He promises that he will continue to dwell in the midst of Israel (vv. 9–24; see
also 33:15–17).

Exodus 35–40 details the construction of the tabernacle and its furnishings. The
common refrain throughout these chapters is that all of these things are done as God has
commanded Moses. The construction of the tabernacle demonstrates that despite
Israel’s sin, God still intends to dwell with his people. After the tabernacle is
constructed and the priests are consecrated, “the glory of Yahweh filled the tabernacle”
(40:34). The glory cloud covers the tent of meeting and initially prevents Moses from
entering (vv. 34–35; see also Lev. 1:1). God’s dwelling with his people, initially
fulfilled here by the filling of the tabernacle with the glory of God, will be more
completely fulfilled in the coming of Christ (John 1:14) and in the church (Eph. 2:22).
Its ultimate fulfillment, however, awaits the new heavens and earth (Rev. 21:3, 22;
22:3). The book of Exodus ends by describing how the glory cloud of God guided
Israel throughout her journeys beginning the push toward the Promised Land of Canaan
(Ex. 40:36–38).

Leviticus
The final chapters of Exodus, recounting the construction of the tabernacle, naturally
lead to the opening chapters of Leviticus, which describe in detail the various sacrifices
to be offered there. Christian readers of Scripture often neglect Leviticus because of
the seeming obscurity of its contents regarding animal sacrifices and various other
ritual ceremonies. The difficulty of understanding the book, however, is lessened if its
overarching point is remembered. The central theme of this third book of the
Pentateuch is the holiness of God. In connection with this is the requirement that God’s
people reflect his holiness in all of their lives and in their worship (Lev. 11:45). God
had promised to dwell in the midst of his people, his kingdom of priests, meaning that
all of Israel’s life would be lived in the presence of a holy God. The prescriptions for
holiness found throughout Leviticus thus ensure the continuing presence of God with
his covenant people, his holy nation.

From the book of Exodus, Leviticus presupposes God as the One who has delivered
Israel from bondage in Egypt and covenanted with Israel to be their God. Hence, it
conceives of God as somehow resident among the Israelites in their camp (Lev. 1:1).
For Israel, the implications of that residency revolve around two pairs of terms:
“holy” and “profane,” “clean” and “unclean.” What is holy has been marked off or
set aside for God. In Leviticus, the holy include people (the Aaronic priesthood),
space (the tabernacle, which has the peculiar feature that it can be moved),
implements used in worship (priestly garb, vessels of various sorts, the altar), and
time (festivals, the Day of Atonement). Laws pertaining to these items appear in Lev.
1–10, 16, 23–25, and 27. In addition, things in the world are either clean or unclean.
What is holy is supposed to be clean, but can be polluted by what is unclean. Hence, both sacred and nonsacred people have to be careful how they approach the holy, lest they pollute it and bring danger upon themselves and/or others. So, the book of Leviticus contains numerous laws about dealing with impurity, including diet, the purification of women after childbirth, the purification of lepers, and proper sexual relations (Lev. 11, 12, 13–15, and 18 respectively). Either priests or the people can be rendered unholy, with the result that they have to be sanctified before they can again approach the holy (Lev. 18–20; ch. 21 for priests only). Jenson has argued that this worldview actually amounted to a system running from the very holy through the holy, the clean, the unclean, to the very unclean.

One should note, however, that the term “holy” is also used of God, and not only as what is set apart for God (Lev. 19:2 et passim). God is both the source of life and the only being worthy of worship. Hence, idolatry is wrong. Moreover, to be holy as God is holy involves morality in the sense of living in proper communion with God and humans, of recognizing one’s dependence upon God and limits to one’s desires and rights, and thus the necessity for justice in human affairs. …

The book of Leviticus (particularly chs. 17–26) emphasizes the holiness of God as the most important theological motif. The holy is *mysterium tremendum et fascinans*, to use Otto’s terms. Worshippers confront God as an overwhelming and yet appealing mystery, and then recognize themselves as creaturely. Regardless of the characteristic of God by which worshippers might measure themselves (e.g., power, knowledge, love, moral purity), God is always superior.

Leviticus is about worship. The sacrificial system is the means it outlines by which penitent sinners can express their contrition to God. It is never intended as the vehicle to buy forgiveness, as the prophets made clear (cf. Isa. 1:12–15; Amos 5:21–24). Nevertheless, it speaks the word of God that in worship people should express contrition and ask forgiveness (Lev. 1:1–2:16; 4:1–5:13), share with others and with God (3:1–17), and be prepared to make restitution for losses inflicted on others (5:14–6:7). It has a healthy appreciation for the role of ritual in living the holy life and the possibility of forgiveness when God’s people fail. (*Dictionary of Theological Interpretation of the Bible*, General Editor: Kevin J. Vanhoozer, Associate Editors: Craig G. Bartholomew, Daniel J. Treier, and N. T. Wright, *Leviticus, Book of*, Paul L. Redditt, pp. 448-449)

The book of Leviticus may be divided into four main sections. Chapters 1–7 outline laws regarding various sacrifices. Chapters 8–10 deal with the consecration of priests. Chapters 11–16 outline various rituals designed to deal with uncleanness. Finally, chapters 17–27, sometimes termed the Holiness Code, describe the practical holiness required of the people of Israel. The eschatological significance of Leviticus may not be as obvious as in the case of Genesis or certain other biblical books, but as we will see, Leviticus does contain much that is important for a biblical understanding of eschatology.

The first seven chapters of Leviticus provide the instructions for several kinds of sacrifices: the burnt offering (ch. 1; 6:8–13), the grain offering (ch. 2; 6:14–18), the peace offering (ch. 3; 7:11–36), the sin offering (4:1–5:13; 6:24–30), and the guilt
offering (5:14–6:7; 7:1–10). In order to understand the nature and purpose of these sacrifices, it is necessary to understand what Leviticus teaches regarding cleanness and uncleanness. Gordon Wenham provides a helpful explanation:

Everything that is not holy is common. Common things divide into two groups, the clean and the unclean. Clean things become holy, when they are sanctified. But unclean objects cannot be sanctified. Clean things can be made unclean, if they are polluted. Finally, holy items may be defiled and become common, even polluted, and therefore unclean.

He provides a diagram that graphically illustrates the point.

The Holy and Unclean, Separate.

\[
\begin{array}{c}
\text{sanctify} \\
\text{cleanse} \\
\text{clean} \\
\text{unclean}
\end{array}
\]

As the figure indicates, the holy and the unclean cannot come into contact. Sin and various infirmities defile the holy and pollute the clean. The solution that God has provided to cleanse the unclean and to sanctify the clean is sacrifice. This is illustrated in the next figure. By means of the proper sacrifices, purity could be restored. Repentant Israelites could offer a sacrificial substitute that would bear the penalty for sin and restore the covenant relationship. [The substitutionary nature of the sacrifices is indicated by the sinner’s laying of his hands on the head of the animal (1:4; 3:2; 4:4).]

Although not explicitly prophetic, the sacrifices of Leviticus 1–7 do point forward to the sacrificial death of Jesus (Heb. 9:11–10:18). He is the one who fulfills all that they symbolize by dealing with the problem of sin once and for all.

The Unclean, Cleansed and Made Holy.

\[
\begin{array}{c}
\text{SACRIFICE} \\
\text{sanctify} \\
\text{cleanse} \\
\text{clean} \\
\text{unclean}
\end{array}
\]

Leviticus 8–10 describes the Aaronic priesthood. The ordination of Aaron and his sons is described in chapter 8 (see also Ex. 29). Leviticus 9 describes Aaron’s first sacrifices and God’s acceptance of those sacrifices, while chapter 10 tells of the judgment of God upon Aaron’s sons Nadab and Abihu for their presumptuous unauthorized offering. Leviticus reveals that the central task of Israel’s priesthood was to protect the holiness of God. The priests were mediators between God and Israel. Like the sacrifices that were offered, the priesthood itself also foreshadowed Christ. The priesthood pointed to the need for a perfect mediator between God and man. Ultimately, Christ fulfills all that the Israelite priesthood symbolized (Heb. 4:14–5:10; 7:11–8:13; 1 Tim. 2:5).

In Leviticus 10:10, God instructs Aaron, “You are to distinguish between the holy and the common, and between the unclean and the clean.” Chapters 11–15 of Leviticus enable Aaron to fulfill his duties by describing all kinds of uncleanness as well as the rituals required for cleansing. Chapter 16 then describes the Day of Atonement
ceremony in which the tabernacle itself was purified from ritual uncleanness. By distinguishing between clean and the unclean, God reminds the people that he has made a distinction between Israel and all other nations. Israel was to be a holy nation, set apart for God. Only in this way could Israel ultimately be a blessing to the other nations.

The Day of Atonement, outlined in chapter 16, was the holiest day of the year for Israel. As Allen Ross explains, “Once a year, at the end of the year, all their sins and defilements were taken care of and they could start anew.” After describing the animals needed for the ceremony (vv. 3–5), Leviticus provides a brief summary of the rites (vv. 6–10) before proceeding to detail the necessary ceremonies (vv. 11–28).

After bathing himself, the high priest was to sacrifice a bull as a sin offering for himself (v. 11). He was to take the blood of the bull along with coals and incense into the Holy Place (vv. 12–13). He was then to take the blood of the bull and sprinkle it on the ark inside the Most Holy Place (v. 14). The high priest would then take one of two goats already chosen by lot, sacrifice it as a sin offering for the people, and sprinkle its blood on the ark as well as on the tent of meeting itself (vv. 15–16).

After exiting the Holy Place, the high priest would take some of the blood of the bull and the goat and sprinkle it on the altar (16:18–19). He would then lay his hands on the head of the remaining goat and confess over it the sins of the people of Israel (vv. 20–21). The goat would then be sent away into the wilderness, bearing the sins of the people (v. 22). Finally, after changing into his regular priestly clothes, the high priest would sacrifice burnt offerings for himself and for the people of Israel (vv. 23–24). In this way, atonement was made for the sanctuary, the tent of meeting, the altar, the priests, and the people (v. 33).

Like the other sacrifices and temple rituals, the Day of Atonement was eschatologically significant because it was a shadow of greater things to come (Heb. 9:6–28; 13:11–13). It too pointed forward to Christ, who by means of his own blood secured an eternal redemption (Heb. 9:12). It pointed forward to his perfect high priesthood (Heb. 8:1–7; 9:11). It also pointed forward to his substitutionary atonement (Heb. 9:12–28). The original Day of Atonement ceremonies were copies of heavenly things (Heb. 9:23). Christ’s high-priestly offering of himself as a sacrifice was the reality (9:24).

Leviticus 17–27 is sometimes referred to as the Holiness Code. These chapters outline the practical holiness required of the people of Israel. Within these chapters there are instructions regarding food, sexual behavior, criminal offenses, religious festivals, and numerous other issues. For our purposes, one text requires brief attention. Leviticus 25 describes the year of jubilee. Every seventh year was to be a Sabbath of rest for the land (25:1–8; Ex. 23:10–11). After seven Sabbath years (forty-nine years), the fiftieth year was to be a jubilee (25:8–12). The jubilee is significant because in that year “the land reverts to its original owner and the slave is given his freedom.” (The reversion of land to its original owners was to remind the people of Israel that the land truly belongs to God and they were simply tenants (Lev. 25:23–24). The Promised Land too was a shadow of something greater to come (Heb. 11:14–16).) With a mighty hand, God had redeemed his people from oppression and slavery in Egypt. The jubilee “is thus a guarantee that no Israelite will be reduced to that status again, and it is a celebration of
the great redemption when God brought Israel out of Egypt.” According to the New Testament, Christ is the fulfillment of all that the jubilee foreshadowed. It is he who was sent to proclaim liberty to the captives (Luke 4:18), to those in bondage to sin and death. The messianic age, then, is the true jubilee.

Numbers

The fourth book of the Pentateuch is titled Numbers in English, but its Hebrew name, “in the wilderness,” is a more accurate description of its contents. The book is largely concerned with the forty years Israel spent in the wilderness on their journey from Mount Sinai to the plains of Moab. Numbers is integral to the overall structure and story of the Pentateuch. It describes “the transition from the old generation that left Egypt and sinned in the desert to the new generation that stands on the brink of the Promised Land.” The transitional nature of Numbers may be seen in its basic structure, which is formed around the taking of two distinct censuses. The first major section of the book, chapters 1–25, begins with a census and describes the end of the old generation that had been brought up out of Egypt, a generation that continually rebelled against Moses and God. After the death of this first generation, a new census is taken, beginning the second major section of the book in chapters 26–36. These chapters describe the preparations of the new generation to enter Canaan.

The book of Numbers is closely connected to Exodus and Leviticus, but it has a different emphasis. Exodus is primarily concerned with the exodus from Egypt, the covenant at Sinai, and the tabernacle. Leviticus is primarily concerned with the nature of the holiness required to live in God’s presence. Numbers, on the other hand, is primarily concerned with the land that God promised Abraham and with Israel’s slow journey toward possession of that land. As Wenham observes, “The whole book of Numbers looks forward to the occupation of the land of Canaan.” It is the land God has given to Israel for a permanent possession (32:7; Gen. 17:8).

The first ten chapters of Numbers describe Moses’ preparations of the people of Israel for their journey from Mount Sinai to Canaan. This takes place over a period of approximately fifty days. Numbers 1–4 describes Moses’ census of the people, the arrangement of the tribes around the tabernacle, a census of the Levites, and the duties of the Levites for service, and the observance of the second Passover. And although Israel was to be guided by God in a cloud (9:15–23), God also instructs Moses to construct two silver trumpets, which will be used primarily to summon the congregation and to break camp (10:1–10).

The next section of Numbers recounts the journey of Israel from Mount Sinai to Kadesh (10:11–12:16; 13:26). After almost a year at Sinai, Israel finally departs for the Promised Land (10:11–36). However, no sooner does Israel depart than the people begin to grumble (11:1–15; cf. Ex. 15:22–17:7). Grumbling and disobedience remain a common refrain throughout the first section of Numbers (12:1–2; 13:1–14:45; 16:1–40; 20:1–13; 21:5–9; 25:1–5). Because of the great burden that leading the people has become for Moses, God instructs him to gather seventy elders at the tent of meeting to share the burden (11:16). After Moses has done as the Lord instructed him, God takes some of the Spirit that is on Moses and gives it to the seventy elders. As soon as the Spirit rests on them, they begin to prophesy (vv. 24–25). Two of the elders had
remained in the camp, however; and when they begin to prophesy, Joshua informs Moses (vv. 26–27). When he asks Moses to stop them, Moses replies, “Are you jealous for my sake? Would that all Yahweh’s people were prophets, that Yahweh would put his Spirit on them!” (v. 29). These words of Moses anticipate the prophecy of Joel that is ultimately fulfilled on the day of Pentecost (Joel 2:28–29; Acts 2:15–21).

Numbers 13–14 is crucial in the story of Israel’s journey to the land. Israel has made it to the border of the land promised by God to their fathers so long ago. God now instructs Moses to send spies into the land (13:1–2). Moses chooses twelve men, one from each tribe (vv. 3–16), and gives them their instructions (vv. 17–20). After forty days the spies return (v. 25). They tell the people of Israel that the land flows with milk and honey, but they then claim that the people in the land are too strong to conquer (vv. 26–33). Only two of the spies, Joshua and Caleb, argue that Israel can conquer the land (13:30; 14:6–9). Upon hearing the report of the spies, the people despair and grumble against Moses (14:1–12). Their rejection of the land is a failure to believe God’s promise, and it is the “cardinal sin” they commit. It is comparable to the sin the people committed when they worshiped the golden calf in that, again, God threatens to utterly destroy them and begin anew with Moses (14:11–12; Ex. 32:10). Once again, however, Moses intercedes on behalf of the people and averts God’s wrath (Num. 14:13–19).

God pardons the people because of Moses’ intercession, but he also passes judgment. Aside from Caleb and Joshua, no one above the age of twenty will be allowed to enter the land. Instead, this generation will be forced to wander in the wilderness for forty years (14:20–38). There they will die (vv. 29, 32, 33, 35; cf. v. 2). They are instructed to turn back toward the Red Sea (v. 25). They had constantly complained that it would be better to return to Egypt (e.g., 14:1–4), and here God grants their request. When the Israelites realize what they have done, they determine that they will now go into the land. Moses informs them it is too late for that, and if they attempt to go into the land they will be defeated (vv. 39–43). Despite Moses’ warning, the people proceed to enter the land and are quickly driven back by the Canaanites (vv. 44–45).

In Numbers 15, God gives Moses various laws concerning sacrifices. He tells Moses that these laws are for the people when they “come into the land” (v. 2). This indicates that in spite of Israel’s sin, God has not forsaken his promise. He will bring Israel into the land that he promised to Abraham. Numbers 16–19 includes the story of Korah’s rebellion (ch. 16), the proof of Aaron’s priestly authority (ch. 17), the duties of the Levites (ch. 18), and various laws concerning purification (ch. 19). Numbers 20 tells the story of the disobedience of Moses and Aaron at Meribah. Because of their act of unbelief, neither Moses nor Aaron will be permitted to enter into the Promised Land (v. 12). God also tells Moses and Aaron that because of their lack of faith, Aaron will be gathered to his people. In other words, he will die (vv. 23–24). Upon his death, his son Eleazar assumes his office (vv. 25–28).

The grumbling of the people becomes an issue again in Numbers 21, and as a judgment God sends poisonous serpents among the people. When the people repent, God instructs Moses to make a bronze serpent and set it on a pole. He promises that those who are bitten and look upon the bronze serpent shall live (21:8–9). To look upon this
bronze serpent for healing was an act of faith in God’s promise. As such it foreshadows faith in Christ (John 3:14–15).

The story of Baalam is found in Numbers 22–24. Israel has camped at the plains of Moab, and Balak the king of Moab is overcome with fear (22:1–4). As a result, he summons Balaam, a pagan prophet from Mesopotamia, to curse the Israelites (vv. 5–8). God, however, does not allow Balaam to curse Israel, but commands him to bless Israel instead. In chapters 23–24, to Balak’s dismay, Balaam delivers four oracles of blessing upon Israel. The fourth oracle is particularly notable because of its structure and content. It is the second of the three instances in the Pentateuch where a lengthy poetic section is introduced by someone calling an audience and proclaiming what will happen in the latter days (Num. 24:14; cf. Gen. 49:1; Deut. 31:28–29). Balaam foresees the coming of a king, but the coming is not to be immediate: “I see him, but not now; I behold him, but not near” (Num. 24:17). The coming king is described as a star coming out of Jacob and a scepter rising out of Israel (v. 17; Gen. 49:10). This king will utterly defeat his enemies (Num. 24:18). This prophecy would find its initial fulfillment in the reign of David, but its ultimate fulfillment awaited the coming of the Messiah.

The section of Numbers concerning the first generation of Israel ends with an act of total apostasy by the people (ch. 25). The people of Moab successfully encourage the Israelites to worship Baal of Peor (vv. 1–3). This idolatry results in a death sentence being passed on those who participated as well as a plague that kills twenty-four thousand (vv. 4–9; cf. Ex. 32:35). The plague is stopped because of the zeal of Eleazar’s son Phinehas who puts to death an Israelite man and Midianite woman who were showing flagrant contempt for the holiness of the camp (Num. 25:7–15). God then passes judgment upon the Midianites for tempting Israel to idolatry and orders Moses to strike them down (vv. 16–18). With this final act of blatant rebellion against God, the story of the first generation to come out of Egypt ends. Because of their unbelief and disobedience, God did not permit them to enter the land. He did not allow them to enter his rest (Heb. 3:16–19).

The second major section of Numbers begins in chapter 26 with a census of the new generation of Israel on the plains of Moab almost forty years after the first census. Such a census was necessary because the conquest of Canaan was imminent, and the size of the tribes was to determine the amount of territory in the land that each would inherit (26:52–56). Chapter 27 describes the anointing of Joshua as Moses’ successor. Because Moses has been told that he will not enter the land, he asks God to appoint someone to lead the people into Canaan, and God chooses Joshua (27:12–23).

Various laws regarding the offerings and vows are given to Moses in chapters 28–30 before we read of the fulfillment of God’s command to strike down the Midianites (31:1–54; cf. 25:16–18). Numbers 32 then tells of the decision of Reuben and Gad and the half tribe of Manasseh to settle in the land east of the Jordan River. Moses gives them permission to do this on the condition that they assist the other tribes in conquering the Promised Land west of the Jordan (vv. 20–22). The book of Numbers ends with a summary of Israel’s journeys between Egypt and the plains of Moab (ch. 33), a statement of the boundaries of the Promised Land (ch. 34), and laws concerning
cities for the Levites, cities of refuge, and the rights of female heirs (chs. 35–36). After so many years, Israel now stands on the brink of her promised inheritance.

Deuteronomy
The book of Deuteronomy is one of the four most frequently cited Old Testament books in the New Testament. Its basic subject matter is the renewal of the covenant on the plains of Moab immediately prior to Israel’s entrance into the Promised Land. The death of Moses was approaching, and he needed to prepare the people for a transition in leadership. In addition, he needed to prepare the people for the wars of conquest they were about to undertake. The book of Deuteronomy, then, is something of a constitution for the people of God now set up as a theocratic nation. It is also a call for Israel to make a decision. Will they obey and enjoy God’s blessing? Or will they disobey and experience the curses of the covenant?

The book of Deuteronomy serves not only as the concluding book to the Pentateuch but perhaps more importantly as a hermeneutical key to the entire Pentateuch. Functionally, the book of Deuteronomy connects the stories of the patriarchs and the Sinai experience with what follows in the Deuteronomistic history. Theologically, however, the book of Deuteronomy makes obedience to the words of Yahweh the central point in interpreting the history of God’s people. (The Hebrew title of Deuteronomy, “These are the words …” places the emphasis on the spoken demands of Yahweh. The words of Yahweh spoken through Moses, his mediator, become vitally important if Israel hopes to remain the people of God—they become binding.) (The Story of Israel: A Biblical Theology, C. Marvin Pate, J. Scott Duvall, J. Daniel Hays, E. Randolph Richards, W. Dennis Tucker Jr. and Preben Vang, pp. 42-43)

Deuteronomy is important for the way it ties together what precedes it to what follows. Historically, the covenant in the plains of Moab bridged the Sinai covenant with life in the promised land. So also Deuteronomy forms a literary bridge between the Pentateuch and the historical books.

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It looks both back in time and forward to the future. As a crystallization of the covenantal law, it summarizes the Pentateuch and brings this monumental first section of the Bible to a fitting close. But Deuteronomy is also forward-looking. It prepares the Israelites for their future life with God in the promised land, and lays the literary and theological foundation for the historical books.
Deuteronomy is a pivotal book in the Old Testament canon. The first nine books of the Bible (Genesis to 2 Kings) may be called the Primary History. Deuteronomy is literally at the center of that history, serving as the literary and theological hinge on which all the rest swing.

Deuteronomy is the culminating expression of the Mosaic covenant. As in the previous books of the Pentateuch, Deuteronomy is greatly concerned with law. Here, as nowhere else in the Pentateuch, the underlying principle of the law is love, which characterizes the relationship between God and his people. The concrete imperatives of the Ten Commandments objectify this principle and then receive more specific application in the stipulations of chapters 12-26.

The basis of the nation’s relationship to God flowed from his love for them and from their appropriate response of obedience. When God’s people break his commandments, they break the relationship of love (Mt 22:35-40; Jn 14:15). Obedience to God’s law is a byproduct of a relationship of love. Love is the essence of the relationship; law is the natural result.

Deuteronomy is the foundation stone for the so-called Deuteronomistic History. The books of Joshua, Judges, Samuel, and Kings comprise a unit of historical books with a strong deuteronomistic influence. Deuteronomy sets the stage on which the drama described in the historical books takes place. The covenant’s call to choose between life and death, blessings and curses, is a prelude to the story of national Israel (Dt 30:19).

God’s people stand on the verge of nationhood in Canaan. Deuteronomy becomes the nation’s formative constitution. It is a covenant renewal document, which also prescribed their future relationship with God, with each other, and with surrounding nations. The expression of Israel’s relationship to God in the form of a covenant is the most important Old Testament expression of Israelite faith. This is the distinguishing characteristic of Hebrew religion. (EBS, Encountering the Old Testament: A Christian Survey, Bill T. Arnold & Bryan E. Beyer, pp. 151-154)

Much of the book of Deuteronomy consists of three addresses by Moses to the people of Israel (1:6–4:43; 4:44–29:1; 29:2–30:20). These three addresses, however, are placed within a larger structure that is very similar to the structure of the ancient Near Eastern suzerain-vassal treaties. These ancient treaties included several distinct elements: a title/preamble, a historical prologue, basic and detailed stipulations, deposition of the text, reading arrangements, witnesses, blessings, and curses. Deuteronomy shares these features and this basic treaty structure. It has a preamble (1:1–5), a historical prologue (1:6–3:29), basic stipulations (4:1–11:32), detailed stipulations (12:1–26:19), provisions for the deposition of the text (31:24–26), reading arrangements (31:9–13), witnesses (31:19–22, 26), blessings for obedience (28:1–14), and curses for disobedience (28:15–68). Although perhaps not immediately apparent on the surface of the text, there is much within this book that is significant for understanding biblical eschatology.
Preamble and Historical Prologue (Deut. 1–3)
The first verses of Deuteronomy set the stage and link the book to Numbers (Deut. 1:1–5; Num. 36:13). The tribes of Israel are in Moab on the borders of the Promised Land, and these are the words Moses spoke to them. Moses begins by recounting all that has happened from the time God brought the people up out of Egypt until they arrived in Moab (Deut. 1:6–3:29). His historical summary recounts God’s faithfulness as well as Israel’s constant stubbornness and lack of faith. Moses’ emphasis throughout these chapters is upon Israel’s initial faithless refusal to enter the land and the resulting judgment of forty years of wandering in the wilderness. This is to serve as a reminder of what God has done in the past and as a warning of the kind of judgment that will befall Israel in the case of future rebellion against her divine King.

Legal Stipulations (Deut. 4–26)
Deuteronomy 4–26 is a lengthy collection of legal stipulations, laws that Israel is to obey in the land (4:1). Many of these laws are repetitions and expansions of laws found in Exodus in the Book of the Covenant (Ex. 20:22–23:33). Understandably, the land is a significant emphasis throughout these chapters. It is obedience to the law that will allow Israel to enter and possess the land. But obedience to the law would not merely result in blessings for Israel. Her obedience to the law was also to be a witness to the nations of the righteousness and wisdom of God (Deut. 4:6–8). The establishment of Israel as a nation was never intended to be an end in itself.

In Deuteronomy 4, Moses introduces the legal stipulations with a warning against idolatry (vv. 15–31). The penalty for idolatry will be exile from the land (vv. 26–28). But Moses also holds out hope by insisting that even if Israel commits idolatry God will not forget his covenant and that the people will return to God (vv. 29–31). In the fifth chapter of Deuteronomy, Moses reaffirms the Ten Commandments, recontextualizing them for this new generation. The Shema, a text of great importance to successive generations of Israelites, is found in chapter 6:4–9. It begins with a declaration about God and concludes with a statement of the greatest commandment: “Hear, O Israel: Yahweh our God, Yahweh is one. You shall love Yahweh your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might” (vv. 4–5; see also Matt. 22:36–37). This is the heart of Israel’s confession.

After outlining Israel’s policy of holy war (Deut. 7) and warning Israel not to forget God (ch. 8), Moses elaborates at length on Israel’s stubbornness (chs. 9–10). He informs the people that the Canaanites are being driven out of the land because of their own wickedness, not because of Israel’s righteousness (9:1–5). In fact, far from being righteous, Israel is a stubborn people who have continually provoked God from the day they came out of Egypt (vv. 6–7). Gordon McConville explains the problem: “By placing this elaboration of Israel’s failure at this point, before the long series of laws that they are required to keep, Deuteronomy seems deliberately to sharpen the dilemma that it sees, namely, how it can be that a people who cannot keep covenant should be given a land on the express condition that they do so.” Israel’s consistent inability to obey God presents a significant problem. An answer to the problem will not be found until chapter 30.
Moses reminds the nation of her past faithlessness at Horeb/Sinai when she built and worshiped the golden calf (9:8–10:11). He tells the people that what God requires is “to fear Yahweh your God, to walk in all his ways, to love him, to serve Yahweh your God with all your heart and with all with all your soul, and to keep the commandments and statutes of Yahweh, which I am commanding you today for your good” (10:12–13). Because God has chosen Israel, Moses commands them: “Circumcise therefore the foreskin of your heart, to remove anything that hinders true faithfulness and love of God. Outward circumcision alone will not result in their receiving the blessings of the covenant. The inner reality signified by circumcision is required as well. If Israel is to maintain possession of the land, she must love and serve God (ch. 11).

Chapters 12–26 of Deuteronomy contain a large number of detailed laws intended for Israel’s life and worship in the land. Some of these are particularly significant for an understanding of biblical eschatology. In Deuteronomy 17:14–20, for example, Moses incorporates legislation pertaining to kings into the covenant. He anticipates that there will come a time when Israel will demand a king, and he makes provision for this future eventuality. Because Israel is a theocracy, with God as her one true King, any human king must be one that God himself chooses from among Israel (v. 15). Moses warns of the dangers of autocratic rulers and stipulates that any Israelite king must exercise his authority under God and in accordance with the stipulations of the law (vv. 16–20).

The establishment of the prophetic office is the subject of Deuteronomy 18:15–22. After outlining forbidden ways of trying to know the will of God (vv. 9–14), Moses proceeds to explain the nature of prophecy, the legitimate means by which God would communicate his word to his people (vv. 15–22). He declares to the people, “Yahweh your God will raise up for you a prophet like me from among you, from your brothers—it is to him you shall listen” (v. 15). God here provides for the continuation of the prophetic office after the death of Moses.

It is important to remember, however, that Moses was unique among the prophets as a minister of God’s covenant (Num. 12:6–8; Deut. 34:10–12). He was, as Willem VanGemeren observes, “the fountainhead of the prophets.” As we shall see, the message of the prophets was rooted in the Mosaic covenant. Jeffrey Niehaus explains:

The prophetic ministry was of two kinds: the prophet as covenant mediator (Moses only); the prophet as covenant lawsuit messenger (subsequent prophets). God had raised up the prophet Moses to mediate his covenant to Israel; he would raise up other prophets to bring covenant lawsuit—to recall the people to covenant obedience or to announce covenantal punishments incurred by their disobedience.

God’s promise to raise up another prophet like Moses was later understood by the Israelites to be a messianic prophecy (John 1:21, 45; 6:14; 7:40). Ultimately this prophetic promise points to Jesus, the unique mediator of the new covenant.

Moses explains the origin of the prophetic office in terms of the events at Mount Sinai when the people had demanded that Moses bring the word of God to them (Deut. 18:16–17). He tells the people that God will put his words in the mouth of the prophet, and the prophet will speak all that God commands him to speak (v. 18). Israel is to
listen to God’s prophet (v. 9). This requirement raises an important question. How are
the people to distinguish between a true prophet and a false prophet? Moses provides
the answer. First, a true prophet will urge the people to be faithful to the covenant. If
he urges disobedience or speaks in the name of other gods, he is a false prophet (v. 20).
Second, the words of a true prophet will come to pass (v. 22).

Blessings, Curses, and Covenant Ratification (Deut. 27–30)
Deuteronomy 27–30 is important for an understanding of biblical eschatology because
it contains God’s pronouncement of the blessings that will result from obedience to the
stipulations of the Mosaic covenant and the curses that will result from disobedience
(cf. Lev. 26). In Deuteronomy 27, Moses commands the people to set up plastered
stones at Mount Ebal upon which they are to write all the words of the law (vv. 1–8).
After the people enter the land, six of the tribes are to stand on Mount Gerizim and six
are to stand on Mount Ebal (vv. 11–13). The Levites are then to recite a summary of
the curses of the covenant (vv. 14–26). Chapter 28 outlines in great detail the blessings
for obedience to God’s covenant stipulations (vv. 1–14) and the curses for disobedience
(vv. 15–68). Among the curses is the ultimate punishment, namely exile from the land
(vv. 36, 64–65).

The lengthy recitation of blessings and curses is followed in chapters 29–30 by Moses’
third major address to the people. In this final address, he reminds them of all that God
has done for them and appeals for covenant faithfulness (ch. 29). He then places before
them a choice between life and death and demands a decision (ch. 30). In his final
address, Moses foresees that the people will not remain true to God and that the curses
of the covenant, including exile, will ultimately fall upon them (30:1). But he also
foresees that Israel will eventually repent and be restored from exile (vv. 2–10). This
foreseen restoration from exile, however, raises an important question. Gordon
McConville explains:

Deuteronomy 30:2–3 pictures the people’s repentance in exile, which in turn
precipitates a restoration of their fortunes, here explicitly involving a return to the
land. This structure immediately raises the question how that new restored situation
might be any different from the old, the one that had such wretched and apparently
inevitable results.

In other words, even if Israel repents and is restored from exile, what is to prevent the
entire cycle of disobedience and curses from occurring again?

An answer to the problem is found in Deuteronomy 30:6 where Moses declares, “And
Yahweh your God will circumcise your heart and the heart of your offspring, so that
you will love Yahweh your God with all your heart and all your soul, that you may
live.” What God had commanded in Deuteronomy 10:16, he promises that he himself
will do in 30:6. The answer to the problem of Israel’s stubborn infidelity ultimately
rests in God himself. “He will somehow enable his people ultimately to do what they
cannot do in their strength, namely, to obey him out of the conviction and devotion of
their own hearts.” God’s promise to circumcise their hearts anticipates the promise of a
new heart and new covenant found in the prophets (Jer. 31:31–34; Ezek. 36:22–28). In
effect, God is telling Israel in Deuteronomy that she cannot in her own strength obey
the very large law that he is giving her. Because of Israel’s stubborn self-confidence, however, this is something she will have to learn the hard way.

**Succession Arrangements (Deut. 31–34)**

The final chapters of Deuteronomy are concerned primarily with succession arrangements. In chapter 31, the Levites are commanded to read the law to the people of Israel every seven years (vv. 9–13). The reading of the law will remind Israel of her obligations and will also be a means of teaching the younger generations. Deuteronomy 31:14–30 tells of the commissioning of Joshua as the successor of Moses (31:1–8). These verses are also prophetic in that Moses foresees that Israel will not remain faithful to the covenant. Israel will commit idolatry (vv. 16–18, 20–21), and her rebellion will result in judgment from God (vv. 27–29).

God also commands Moses to write a song that will stand as a witness against the people of Israel (31:19, 22). The words of the song are found in chapter 32. This song is to stand as a perpetual warning to Israel. Within the song itself, there is an affirmation about the power of God that is important for this study. Verse 39 reads, “See now that I, even I, am he; and there is no god beside me; I kill and make alive; I wound and heal; and there is none that can deliver out of my hand.” God here introduces a theme that will continue to be developed throughout Scripture, namely, his power to raise the dead (1 Sam. 2:6). Chapters 33–34 conclude the book of Deuteronomy with the final blessing of Israel by Moses (ch. 33) and the record of Moses’ death (ch. 34). Joshua is now the leader of the people as the nation stands poised to enter the land promised them by God.

**Summary**

The importance of the Pentateuch for a proper understanding of biblical eschatology cannot be overstated. The themes introduced in these books are foundational. The significance of Genesis has already been discussed. Exodus–Deuteronomy continues the story begun there. In Exodus, the promises God made to Abraham begin to see fulfillment as God redeems his people from slavery in Egypt. The exodus from Egypt is the birth of the holy nation of Israel, and this event becomes for Israel a paradigm of God’s acts of salvation.

The calling out of Israel to be a theocratic kingdom of priests is another stage in God’s purpose to establish his kingdom and to bless the nations of the earth. After the exodus from Egypt, God establishes the Mosaic covenant, revealing to Moses the law for his kingdom people and the instructions for the tabernacle. In the tabernacle, God the Great King is present again in the midst of his people as he was in Eden. His law reveals the righteousness and holiness required of a people in whose midst God is present.

The holiness required of God’s people is elaborated further in the book of Leviticus where the laws concerning sacrifices and the priesthood are given in detail. Sacrifices provided a means for the people of Israel to be cleansed when they committed sin, and the priests who offered these sacrifices stood as mediators between God and his people. Both the priesthood and the sacrifices pointed forward to a greater eschatological reality to come in the person and work of Jesus the Messiah. The book of Numbers is a
book that details the forty years of wilderness wandering that resulted from Israel’s disobedience and the transition from the old generations to the new generation. Its emphasis is the land of promise, God’s initial step in the process of establishing his kingdom on earth.

Deuteronomy is both part of the Pentateuch and a link to the historical books that follow. As part of the Pentateuch, Deuteronomy is a distinct covenant document that sets forth God’s law for the theocratic kingdom of Israel as well as the blessings that will follow from obedience and the curses that will follow upon disobedience. The historical books of Joshua, Judges, Samuel, and Kings will outline Israel’s history in this light, showing clearly that obedience resulted in blessing, while disobedience resulted in the curses of the covenant. As Deuteronomy ends, Israel is on the border of the Promised Land and has been called to make a choice between obedience and disobedience. In the historical books, we will see Israel’s response.

*(From Age to Age: The Unfolding of Biblical Eschatology, Keith A. Mathison, pp. 49–79)*