

3 A people led by God (Leviticus – Joshua)

The first two books provided the foundation of who God is and what on earth he is doing:

- The LORD is sovereign over all nations (Genesis)
- The LORD is sovereign over the nation that represents him (Exodus).

We'll speed up now, covering two books in our first session this evening (Leviticus and Numbers), and another two in our second hour (Deuteronomy and Joshua). We'll have about 20 minutes for each book.

But first, any pressing questions from last time?

3.1 Devoted to the LORD (Leviticus – Numbers)

Leviticus: priestly laws for a holy nation

Leviticus instructs the priests (from the tribe of Levi) on how to maintain relationship between the heavenly sovereign and the people who live in covenant relationship with him:

- Lev 1–7 defines how the priests were to offer sacrifices to God.
- Lev 8–10 describes how to consecrate the priests.
- Lev 11–15 describes what makes people unclean, and how to cleanse them.
- Lev 16 sets out the ceremonies for the Day of Atonement.
- Lev 17–25 describes how to be holy, devoted to the LORD.
- Lev 26–27 concludes with sanctions and redemption laws.

Christians often struggle to see what relevance this has for us. Often we start with Jesus as sacrificed for our sins, and then treat Israel's sacrificial system as how they got forgiven previously. That's not really what these sacrifices were about.

Sacrifices were gifts (offerings) offered to God. Don't picture an individual feeling so guilty that they need to take another cow to the priest to make up for their sins. Picture the priests offering God a meal every morning, and another meal in the evening, because God is sovereign and they are identifying as his people. The NIV is right to translate this as *a food offering* (Leviticus 1:9, 13, 17; 2:2, 9, 11, 16; 3:3, 5, 9, 11, 14, 16 etc.)

There were different kinds of offerings, such as:

- a) ***Burnt offering***: The animal was consumed by fire (1:3-17; 4:7-34 etc), releasing *a pleasing aroma* into the heavens, a reminder of God's pleasure with his people.
- b) ***Fellowship offering***: The priests sat down to a meal with God, representing the nation sitting at God's table (3:1-9; 4:26-35; 7:11-37 etc).
- c) ***Grain offering***: offerings did not have to be blood sacrifices (2:11-15; 6:14-23 etc).
- d) ***Sin offering***: a gift given to repair relationship (4:3-34; 5:6-19; 6:5-30 etc).

Say you brought your partner a bunch of flowers, and they responded, "What have you done wrong?" They're assuming any gift is a guilt offering. Sometimes it is, but a gift is to maintain relationship, not only to restore when there's a problem.

In Leviticus, *sin* refers to any transgression of God's requirements. You were unclean if you ate certain foods or touched a dead body (11:1-39), or came in contact with a leper (13:1-43), a spreading mould (14:34-48), or something unclean (15:5-27).

For example, Mary was unclean after giving birth to Jesus (due to the amniotic fluid), so she had to bring a *sin offering* (12:6-8; Luke 2:22). It wasn't a "sin" in our sense of the word.

The **Day of Atonement** (*Yom Kippur*) was an annual ceremony to cleanse the whole community (Leviticus 16). They sacrificed one goat, sprinkling its blood on the atonement cover (the lid of the ark). They symbolically transferred the guilt of the people to the other goat, and exiled it from the community to live in the wilderness. In this way, God and his community remained *at-one*. That's what our word atonement means, literally *at-one-ment*.

Hebrews 9–10 draws from the Day of Atonement ceremony to explain how Jesus restored our relationship with God, a one-time event that makes us at-one with God.

The rest of Leviticus (17–27) sets out how God's people were to live as his holy nation. They must represent God's character: ***Be holy, because I am holy*** (11:44-45; 19:2; 20:7, 26).

God expects the community caring for each other as the expression of his character: ***Love your neighbour as yourself. I am the LORD.*** (19:18).

Holy-days were set aside each year when everyone stopped to celebrate life together under God: Passover, Pentecost, Weeks, Trumpets, Day of Atonement, and Tabernacles (Lev 23). These were festive **feasts**. Fasting came later when things started to go wrong.

Every 50th year was a special Jubilee celebration when debt was cleared, slaves were freed, and property returned to the right tribe (25:8-55). We don't know if they ever practiced this.

Any discussion on Leviticus?

Numbers: the generation that didn't make it

God is working to save people from oppression, back under his authority. But what if people don't follow? That seems to be the flaw in God's plan. Must a sovereign God force his will on people? The Book of Numbers answers that question.

How many tribes were there in Israel? How many people in each tribe when they came out of Egypt? What book would you turn to to find out how many? Yes, the Book of ... Numbers.

Moses wasn't merely taking a census. He was organizing a bunch of ex-slaves into a well-structured fighting force consisting of tribes, clans, and families (Numbers 1–2). They were a nation under God's leadership, through the priestly tribe of Levi (3–8). When God moved, they blew the trumpets (the ancient intercom) and set out for the Promised Land (9–10).

Each tribe provided someone to check out the enemy. When they saw the people who were already living in the land of Canaan, ten of the twelve spies said it was impossible:

Numbers 13:27–31 (NIV)

²⁷They gave Moses this account: "We went into the land to which you sent us, and it does flow with milk and honey! Here is its fruit. ²⁸But the people who live there are powerful, and the cities are fortified and very large. ...

³¹We can't attack those people; they are stronger than we are."

The minority report from Judah (Caleb) and Ephraim (Joshua) could not dissuade them. The people whom God had rescued from Pharaoh would not trust God to lead them into the Promised Land. God said, "You're too scared of dying to let me lead you into the Land? Then you will eventually die here in the wilderness, and I'll lead the next generation in."

When God was setting up the Levites to lead them (Numbers 3–8), these rebels complained against God (11) and Moses's leadership (12). Unsurprisingly, God still has to assert his authority (16), and Aaron's (17), and the Levites' (18–19).

Despite the unfaithfulness of this generation, God remains faithful to them. God provides them with food (manna) and water, healing from snakes, and victory from enemies (20–21).

The people of Moab try a more sneaky way to destroy the Israelites. They hire a prophet from the Babylonian region, paying him to proclaim Israel's demise. But as Balaam listens for what the gods are saying, he gets in touch with what has been decreed for Israel:

Numbers 24:15–19 (NIV)

¹⁵The prophecy of Balaam ...

¹⁷"I see him, but not now; I behold him, but not near.

A star will come out of Jacob; **a sceptre** will rise out of Israel.

He will crush the foreheads of Moab, ...

¹⁸Edom will be conquered ... but Israel will grow strong.

¹⁹**A ruler** will come out of Jacob ..."

This is an astounding prophecy, coming from someone who was not serving the LORD. God would provide a king for his nation: *a star* to lead them, *a sceptre* to rule them, *a ruler* for God's people. Even after the Davidic kingship had fallen, God's people heard this as a promise that the anointed ruler (messiah) would be born in David's city (Matthew 2).

If Balaam could not overturn what God had decreed for his people, could he corrupt the people so God would turn against them?

Numbers 25:1–3 (NIV)

While Israel was staying in Shittim, the men began to indulge in sexual immorality with Moabite women, ²who invited them to the sacrifices to their gods. The people ate the sacrificial meal and bowed down before these gods.

³So Israel yoked themselves to the Baal of Peor. And the LORD's anger burned against them.

So, here's the weakness in God's plan to rescue the world into his leadership. God is faithful and able to deliver. **But will people follow God** so the world is rescued, or will we be corrupted by self-interest, our own desires, the deceptiveness of what the current world offers? It turns out that this was Balaam's advice (31:16).

Numbers then concludes with re-numbering the people as the next generation prepares to enter the Promised Land (26) and what the borders will be (34).

Some additional laws were appended over time, such as inheritance laws to cover the case where a family has only daughters (27, 36).

Anything else you'd like to discuss from Leviticus or Numbers?

3.2 A Holy Land (Deuteronomy, Joshua)

Are you ready for a breather and consolidate what we've covered so far? Deuteronomy—the final book of the Torah—gives us the chance to do exactly that.

The original generation have died in the wilderness. For the next generation, Moses reviews how God led them so far and the terms of the covenant that established Israel as God's nation. He's asking the next generation to make their own covenant commitment.

Every generation needs to do that afresh. That's the point of Deuteronomy.

Deuteronomy: the covenant for the next generation

Deuteronomy is structured like a **covenant document** of the ancient world. Christopher Wright explains the structure:

The italicized terms that follow are the key elements in the treaty form, with the matching section of Deuteronomy alongside:

- (a) *Preamble*, identifying the speaker and addressees (1:1–5)
- (b) *Historical prologue*, relating significant events in the relationship between the parties (1:6–4:49)
- (c) *General stipulations*, outlining the broad terms of the treaty (5–11)
- (d) *Detailed stipulations*, the specific requirements of the imperial state on its vassal (12–26)
- (e) *Blessings and curses*, as sanctions and motivation for observing the treaty (27–28)
- (f) *Witnesses* (cf. 30:19; 31:19; 32).³

The “general stipulations” section begins with the **Ten Commandments** (5:6-22).

The treaty defines Israel as the nation whose identity and character come from the LORD:

Deuteronomy 6:4–5 (NIV)

⁴Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one. ⁵Love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength.

That text is what Jewish people call the *Shema* (the Hebrew word for “Hear!”). Devout Jews today pray this three times a day. It is the foundation for every other law (Matthew 22:37).

So, the “general stipulations” section could be summarized like this: *Love the LORD your God and keep his requirements, his decrees, his laws and his commands always* (11:1).

The “detailed stipulations” define the **place** where Israel is to worship (12). We assume it’s Jerusalem, though the Samaritans had a different idea.

We’re familiar with laws about kosher food (14) and the annual festivals (16).

Three kinds of **leaders** are defined: kings (17:14-20), priests (18:1-8), and prophets (18:14-22). Moses was a prophet since he delivered God’s word to Israel. He mentions another whom God will raise after him: *The LORD your God will raise up for you a prophet like me from among you, from your fellow Israelites. You must listen to him* (18:15, compare John 6:14).

Deuteronomy 27–28 describes the **blessings** that covenant obedience will bring to Israel and the trouble (**curses**) they will experience if they are disobedient. God threatens them with disasters, drought, disease, even deportation. But God promised to remain faithful to them, calling them back to faithfulness to him:

Deuteronomy 30:1–4 (NIV)

¹When all these blessings and curses I have set before you come on you and you take them to heart wherever the LORD your God disperses you among the nations, ²and when you and your children return to the LORD your God and obey him with all your heart and with all your soul according to everything I command you today, ³then the LORD your God will restore your fortunes and have compassion on you and gather you again from all the nations where he scattered you. ⁴Even if you have been banished to the most distant land under the heavens, from there the LORD your God will gather you and bring you back.

³ Christopher J. H. Wright, *Deuteronomy*, Understanding the Bible Commentary (Baker Books, 2012), 3.

After his final blessing on the twelve tribes (33), Moses dies (34). It's now over to Joshua to lead the next generation into the Promised Land.

Joshua: taking the land

The Promised Land wasn't empty. Seven nations of Canaanites lived in Canaan. Each city-state had its own king. To take the land, Joshua must fight the Canaanites.

They spied out the land (2) and prepared the troops (3–5). Israel had their first victory when the walls of Jericho fell (6). Subsequent conflicts were not so easy (7–9).

They conquered many cities to the south (10) and the north (11), defeating many kings (12).

Joshua 10:40 (NIV)

⁴⁰So Joshua subdued the whole region, including the hill country, the Negev, the western foothills and the mountain slopes, together with all their kings. He left no survivors. He **totally destroyed all who breathed**, just as the LORD, the God of Israel, had commanded. (Compare Deuteronomy 20:16–18)

But what are we to say about this violence? Is God approving **war**?

We've already seen that when God gave humans authority over the lives of others (Genesis 9:6), the nations began to *hunt* each other to grow their *kingdoms* (Genesis 10:9-12). Though the world belongs to God and he can give it to whomever he chooses, nations invade and make war to expand their power. This was happening in Abraham's time (Genesis 14:1-2).

In a world where people grasp for power that should be in God's hands, war is inevitable. Quite literally, **war comes with the territory**. This was Israel's constant problem: in the time of the Judges, and the kings, until they lost the land to the kingdoms of Assyria and Babylon.

Further, we need to understand that the language of *totally destroying all who breathed* is **hyperbole**.⁴ That's how nations speak about war. Israel did not destroy Rahab the prostitute who protected their spies (6:25). They did not destroy the Gibeonites who tricked Joshua into a treaty (9). They did not destroy the Philistines who were still fighting them in David's day.

In fact, there were large swathes of land that they did not destroy: territory to the south, the north, and the east. Later we'll see that Dan didn't conquer all the territory to the west either.

Joshua 13:1–5 (NIV)

When Joshua had grown old, the LORD said to him, "You are now very old, and there are **still very large areas of land** to be taken over.

²"This is the land that remains: all the regions of the Philistines and Geshurites, ³from the Shihor River on the east of Egypt to the territory of Ekron on the north, all of it counted as Canaanite though held by the five Philistine rulers in Gaza, Ashdod, Ashkelon, Gath and Ekron; the territory of the Avvites ⁴on the south; all the land of the Canaanites, from Arah of the Sidonians as far as Aphek and the border of the Amorites; ⁵the area of Byblos; and all Lebanon to the east, from Baal Gad below Mount Hermon to Lebo Hamath.

It's still horrific that God ordered his people to fight and kill for the land, but it was not a genocide. They did not completely wipe everyone out.

What's astounding is that, when God's Messiah came to restore the kingdom of God to the earth, **Jesus** did not follow his namesake (Joshua) or his ancestor (King David). Jesus

⁴ See Richard S. Hess, *Joshua: An Introduction and Commentary*, Tyndale OT Commentaries (IVP, 1996), 46; Robert L. Hubbard Jr., *Joshua*, NIV Application Commentary (Zondervan, 2009), 45.

condemned the use of the sword. It's a tool that could only perpetuate violence and destroy those who wield it: *all who draw the sword will die by the sword* (Matthew 26:52). The whole of Old Testament history proved his point.

Jesus changed how things are done: *You have heard that it was said, 'Love your neighbour and hate your enemy.' But I tell you, love your enemies ...* (Matthew 5:43-45).

The early church fathers quoted this text more than any other in the days before the Roman emperor Constantine converted to Christianity.

In Christ, the whole world is God's kingdom. Christians are not defending a piece of territory. No matter how the enemies of our faith threaten us, there is **never a time to kill in Jesus' name**. The church dishonours our crucified king when we conduct "holy" wars, Crusades, Inquisitions, burn people at the stake, or bring guns to church to protect ourselves.

Whether nations should use war to protect their territories today is a question the New Testament does not address directly. Jesus never told Herod what to do. Paul never wrote a book on *Ethics for Caesar: How to run a Worldly Government*.

So, **should Christians go to war** when their country commands it? Or should we refuse to kill on the basis that the King of kings commanded us to love our enemies? Christians don't agree. It may come down to who receives your primary allegiance.

What do you think?

The last half of Joshua explains which tribes received which **allotments** in the Promised Land.

To make sense of the Old Testament stories, you need to understand the relationships between the key tribes. Please use the map (below) to identify these tribes.

- Where is **Judah**? This was David's tribe, with Jerusalem. When the nation divided, Judah became a nation in its own right, while the northern tribes kept the name Israel. Simeon's land was included in Judah.
- Where is **Levi**? Sorry: trick question. The priestly tribe of Levi did not receive any land. They looked after *cities of refuge* where someone accused of manslaughter could run for sanctuary (20–21).
- Where is Joseph? His sons became two tribes: **Ephraim** and **Manasseh**. Manasseh had two portions: one in central region; the other across the Jordan River to the east. The *Transjordan* tribes are *Reuben, Gad, and the half tribe of Manasseh* (4:12 etc.) Crucially, Joseph's tribes (Ephraim and Manasseh) dominated Israel, especially after Judah became a separate nation.
- Where is **Dan**? Joshua assigned Dan the coastal region between Judah and Ephraim, but they never managed to capture this territory. Eventually Dan settled at the far north. That meant Dan was the first tribe to fall when Assyria invaded.
- Where is **Benjamin**? Squeezed between Judah and Ephraim, Benjamin sometimes identified with Israel and sometimes with Judah.
- Some smaller tribes constituted Jesus' region of Galilee (compare Matthew 4:15).

The brown areas of the map are other countries. **Ammon** and **Moab** (Lot's descendants) to the east and **Edom** (Esau's descendants) to the southeast are in Jordan today.

The Philistines occupied the coastal region off the map to the southwest (Gaza strip today).

Any questions or observations about how the twelve tribes of Israel related to each other?



Map: Baker's Bible Atlas (Baker Book House, 1973)

3.3 Summary and significance

Tonight we covered four books:

- **Leviticus** set out how the priests were to maintain the relationship between the heavenly sovereign and his earthly nation, recognizing God's authority with their offerings. The nation was called to reflect God's character, to be holy as he is holy.
- **Numbers** described how the generation God had rescued from Egypt did not receive what God had prepared for them, since they refused to follow God into the Land. When people don't follow, they delay (but don't destroy) God's rescue mission.
- **Deuteronomy** repeated God's covenant requirements for the next generation, since every generation must commit to following God.
- **Joshua** recounted how Joshua took the land and divided it among the twelve tribes.

After this, Israel was living in the land. So how did they go as a nation, living as a kingdom of heaven under divine kingship? It turns out to be quite difficult.

In the new covenant, all God's people are priests. We're not called to keep the laws of **Leviticus**, but we are called to represent God's character (1 Peter 2:9, 1:15-16).

Jesus faced the same unresponsiveness that Moses did in **Numbers**. A *faithless generation* tried Jesus' patience too (Mark 9:19), just like those who saw God's miracles at the Red Sea but refused to follow him.

The covenant proclaimed by **Deuteronomy** eventually fell, as the nation was taken over by Assyria and Babylon. So God promised to establish *a new covenant* where people know God and have hearts to follow him (Jeremiah 31:31-34). Jesus established this new covenant in his own blood, at a table reminiscent of the original covenant meal (Matthew 26:28, compare Exodus 24:8-9).

Like **Joshua**, Jesus was the Saviour who leads God's people into all God has promised. Unlike Joshua, Jesus took the violence instead of inflicting it.

Next time we'll discuss the need for human leaders. Please read 1 Samuel 8 and 2 Samuel 7.

Anything you'd like to discuss tonight?