

Part 4: Rules in the Sand



"Thou shalt worship no other god"



Background Notes -

PURPOSE: Leviticus stresses holiness in every aspect of life. Numbers stresses the wandering around in the desert as a result of the failure to recognize God's chosen representatives on earth. The book also teaches that God has given worship to the people as a way of atoning for sin. Deuteronomy is a second account of the Laws of Moses.

AUTHOR: JEDP (See Part 1).

DATE: The 40 year desert journey was from around 1250 to 1210 BC. (The books, however, were written around 622 BC during the reforms).

STYLE: While most of the laws are based on hygiene necessary for a primitive people in a hot desert wilderness, the style is unmistakably priestly, describing not what is healthy or unhealthy, but what is clean or unclean. The emphasis on one God, one people, and one sanctuary is the trademark of the deuteronomist, stressing the religious aspect of the laws.



Opening Quotes -

☞ "The one who bears the sore of leprosy shall cry out, 'Unclean, unclean!'" Lv 13:45

☞ "Though you may have to reprove your fellow man, do not incur sin because of him. You shall love your neighbor as yourself." Lv 19:17

☞ "The Lord bless you and keep you! The Lord let his face shine upon you! The Lord look upon you kindly, and give you peace!" Nb 6:24

☞ "Are you jealous for my sake? Would that all the people of the Lord were prophets!" Nm 11:28

☞ "Did any god venture to go and take a nation for himself?" Dt 4:34

☞ "Hear, O Israel! The Lord is our God, the Lord alone! Therefore, you shall love the Lord, your God, with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your strength." Dt 6:4

☞ "He let you be afflicted with hunger, and then fed you with manna, in order to show you that not by bread alone does man live, but by every word that comes forth from the mouth of the Lord." Dt 8:3

☞ "It is not up in the sky, nor is it across the sea. No, it is something very near to you, already in your mouths and in your hearts; you have only to carry it out." Dt 30:11

| the BIG PICTURE | | ← : LAW, History, Writings, Prophets | | → : key covenants in our Father's plan | |
|-----------------|-----------------------|--------------------------------------|--|---|--|
| 12 Periods ▼ | Plot ▼ | Other books related to period ▼ | | stories in each period ▼ | |
| BC | 🌐 THE BEGINNINGS | GN 1-11 | Ps 8, 104 | Creation, Adam & Eve, Cain & Abel, Noah's ark, Tower of Babel | |
| 1850 | 👤 THE PATRIARCHS | GN 12-50 | | Abraham, Isaac, Jacob (Israel), Joseph, Melchizedek | |
| 1250 | 🏔️ EXODUS FROM EGYPT | EX | | Moses, the burning bush, the plagues, passover, exodus | |
| 1200 | ♣️ JOURNEY TO CANAAN | NM, Jos | LV, DT | Sinai desert, 10 commandments, Levites, Law, Joshua | |
| 1100 | 👤 THE JUDGE CYCLE | Jg | Ruth | 12 tribes, Deborah, Gideon, Samson, Samuel | |
| 1030 | 👤 KINGS & PROPHETS | 1 & 2 S | 1 Ch, Ps, Prov | Saul, David, Solomon, Jerusalem, the Temple | |
| 1000 | 👤 THE DIVIDED KINGDOM | 1 Kg | 2 Ch, Prov, Ecc, Songs | Israel (N), Judah (S), Elijah & Elisha, Isaiah, Assyrian exile | |
| 721 587 | 👤 BABYLONIAN EXILE | 2 Kg | 2 Ch, Tob, Hos, Am, Hab, Is, Jer, Lam, Jl, Mic, Zp, Jon, Nah, Ob, Ez, Dan, Bar | Babylonians, "major" prophets, Isaiah (to Israel), Jeremiah (to Jerusalem), Ezekiel (to Exiles) | |
| 538 | 👤 THE RESTORATION | Ezr, Neh | Est, Judith, Hag, Zech, Mal, Job | Cyrus, 2 nd temple, 2 nd Law, "minor" prophets, new writings | |
| 163 63 | 👤 THE REPURIFICATION | 1 Mac | Dn, 2Mac, Sirach, Wisdom | Greeks, Maccabean revolt, Hasmonean Dynasty, Romans, Jewish sects (Pharisees, Saducees, Zealots, Essenes) | |
| AD | 👤 JESUS CHRIST | LK | MT, MK, JN | Incarnation, Good News, New Law, Cross & Resurrection | |
| 33 70 | 👤 APOSTOLIC CHURCH | Acts | Rm, 1&2Co, Ga, Ep, Phil, Col, 1&2Th, 1&2 Tm, Ti, Phm, Hb, Ja, 1P, 2P, 1,2&3J, Jd, Rv | Pentecost, council, journeys, epistles, Body/Bride of Christ | |



The Story of Part 4: Rules in the Sand



The book of Numbers gets its name from a census taken when all the Israelites were in the desert. The Levites were not to be counted though, since they were set apart as priests. The reason for this is that it was customary for people to offer their first fruits to their gods, and in the pagan religions this amounted to child sacrifice. When God chose the Levites as his own and told Moses to dedicate them to him, he was in effect substituting the Levites for the firstborn children. And in order not to kill the Levites themselves, they in turn were instructed to sacrifice animals to God as an act of expiation (“replacement”). These sacrifices served not only as a form of worship designed to falsify the other gods (like sacrificing a red bull), but also as a form of atonement for sins, knowing that no one could keep all of the laws perfectly. And so the Levites, led by Moses’ brother Aaron, were dedicated to the priestly duties for God’s people: protecting the ark of the covenant which held the tablets of the Ten Commandments, maintaining the tent of worship with its belongings, and blessing the people with the beautiful prayer “May God’s face shine upon you.”

Over time the Levitical priests would formalize the rules and rituals for worshipping Yahweh. One of the most rules was the keeping of the Sabbath day of rest. This law was so central to worshipping Yahweh, that at one point the men in the community stoned a man to death for collecting wood on the Sabbath day. By the time of Christ the keeping of the Sabbath had become a legalistic imposition used even to discourage charitable works towards others, depriving the people from the restful freedom that it was designed to bring. But at this point in history, Israel needed to learn fully the importance of dedicating a day of rest to Yahweh, free of the burden and worry of working to provide for oneself, in order to learn to trust in God’s providence.


And so the Israelites marched on in the desert, heading back to the land of their forefathers, the land of Canaan, a land “flowing with milk and honey”, their promised land! Along the way, when the people became discouraged, complaining to Moses and questioning his role, God would “unleash his wrath” on them, subjecting them to famine, disease, or the sword. He threatened to restart a new people through Moses, but Moses intervened time and again, reminding God of his earlier promises. God “changing his mind” like this and not destroying Israel was his way of communicating to Israel that he does not renege on his promises, and also asserted his choice of Israel as his people, with Moses as their official mediator.

Even though the rest of the tribes had to accept the Levitical priesthood, God had to teach the priests themselves that prophesying in his name was not going to be a monopoly, when two elders began prophesying apart from the official elders who were with Moses. Then it was time for Moses himself to lose a little faith! When God told him to draw water for the people by striking a rock at the place, Meribah, he struck it twice because of his doubt. Because of this, Moses would never enter the Promised Land with the rest of the Israelites.

At this point the book of Numbers closes. The Laws of Moses were for the most part given orally, with only the Decalogue (“ten words”) inscribed on the tablets. Later in Israel’s history a religious reformation would present the opportunity to rewrite the laws on scrolls. This second prescribing of the laws eventually became the book of Deuteronomy (literally, “second law”). Christ himself would later single out the heart of the Law in the two commandments “You must love the Lord your God with all your heart and all your soul” (called the *Schema*) and “Love your neighbor as yourself” (the “golden rule” which God has revealed to just about every religion).

Moses then commissioned Joshua to succeed him, and before dying, pronounced his blessings on all of Israel. The desert journey had finally come to an end. The Israelites were left with two clear warnings as they stood on the brink of the promised land across the Jordan River: (1) Keep the laws given to Moses, and (2) Do not intermarry with the Canaanites (since they worshipped false gods). In the end, the Israelites would inherit their promised land not because they deserved it (especially after their lack of faith in the desert and their ensuing disobedience once in Canaan), but on the sheer merit of God’s promises.

Moses died the greatest of all prophets, the great lawgiver, the “friend of God”. With this, the book of Deuteronomy closes out the Pentateuch, or Law of Moses, the “Torah”. Deuteronomy reflects a religious understanding learned later in Israel’s history. The desert journey had been a time of solidification and testing of God’s people. Now, in order to live long in their promised land, Israel was to deny all other gods and accept the one, true, God who, unlike the false gods, could not be represented with any visible images, since he was infinitely greater than any of his creatures. Though unseen, the one true God had visibly intervened in world history, leading Israel out of Egypt with great signs and wonders. They were his people, and he was their God.

As it was in the beginning, the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob continues to be the God of history, leading his chosen people into the Promised Land. 



Defending the Faith: Is Catholicism idolatrous?

“Catholics break the first commandment because they worship the Pope, Mary, and the saints. This is obvious by the fact that they pray to them, and bow to their statues. Don’t they know there is only one mediator between God and man, Jesus Christ (1 Tim 2:5)?”

Catholics bow in front of statues of Mary and the saints, and they bow in front of the Pope. How is this not worship? Easy: the same way two Japanese people bowing to each other as a custom of courtesy is not worship, or the same way Christian knights in the middle ages bowed to their king without worshipping them.

But aren’t statues of saints idolatry, and didn’t God clearly forbid making any graven image of anything on earth or in heaven? Yes, he did. But in the same passage he also instructed Moses to make graven images (winged angels) on the ark of the covenant, which shows us that statues in and of themselves are not idolatrous. Otherwise the Lincoln Memorial would be idolatrous too! But in every passage where the Bible rebukes someone for bowing (Acts 10:25, Rev 19:10), it is made clear that the bowing intended *worship*, not just honor. The Bible is also full of examples of people bowing in a way that intends honor, not worship.

As for praying to Mary or the saints, just as bowing is not in and of itself worship, neither is praying to someone. The expression “pray to” can be misinterpreted. In old English, “I pray thee” meant “let me ask you” as in “Pray tell, what time is it?” When we pray to Mary or the saints, we are asking them to pray with us and for us. This is not worship! It is intercessory prayer, which Paul encourages just before he says that Jesus is the one mediator between God and man (1 Tim 2:1-5). So between man and Christ

there is such a thing as intercessory prayer which is *encouraged* by the Bible. If this weren’t so, the next time someone says “Pray for me, I have a test tomorrow,” or “Please pray for my grandmother who’s sick in the hospital”, you might as well react with indignation, “How dare you worship me! There is but one mediator between God and man, Jesus Christ!” The real question, then, becomes whether you can pray to someone who is *dead* (and isn’t that like a séance)? First, as for whether angels and saints are alive and hear our prayers, the Bible is actually clear that this is so (Mt 18:10, Rev 5:8)! But this is a far cry from seances, where dead spirits are called up to check in on loved ones, or to discern something about the future. Such practices are clearly forbidden by the Bible and the Church. It should be clear how different summoning spirits is from asking the angels and saints to pray for favors *in Jesus’ name*, and if it’s God’s will!

So what *would* constitute worship of Mary or the saints or the Pope? Making them replacements for God, instead of just prayer partners! Worship is in the heart, not in statues or kneeling. How Mary particularly brings us closer to Jesus is a topic for another time. Until then, let us remind ourselves that faithful Catholics venerate Mary and the saints for the *same reason* faithful non-Catholics don’t: in order to grow *closer* to our Savior, Jesus Christ.



Expressing the Faith: People, Get Ready

Rod Stewart’s remake of a song whose lyrics remind us that in spite of the detailed laws revealed in the desert, it is ultimately by God’s grace, not by unaided efforts, that we merit entrance into the promised land.

***People, get ready, there’s a train a-coming.
You don’t need no baggage, you just get on board.
All you need is faith to hear the diesels humming.
Don’t need no ticket, you just thank the Lord!***

*People, get ready, for the train to Jordan,
Picking up passengers from coast to coast.
Faith is the key, open the doors and board them.
There’s room for all, among the loved the most.*

*There ain’t no room for the hopeless sinner
Who would hurt all mankind just to save his own.
Have pity on those whose chances are thinner
‘cause there’s no hiding place from the Kingdom’s throne.*

(Chorus)

*I’m gettin’ ready... I’m gettin’ ready.
This time I’m ready... This time I’m ready!*

↗ **Next time: “Here Comes the Judge”** ↖