Sermons on the Torah

# (a) Food (Genesis 1—4)

1. Food was God’s first gift.

Genesis 1.

No splitting of aspects of life that are to do with God and spirituality, and aspects that are not.

The distinction between clean and unclean animals.

John 6

Again, God taught them by means of food

Saying Grace – “Blessed are you, king of the universe…”

What we do with our bodies matters (cf. sex)

Call to be healthy

2. Food was something to work for.

Genesis 2

The earthly matters

Jesus was someone who worked with his hands

In CA our life distances us from the earth – we don’t grow or even cook

That means we aren’t human

Grow things on your patio

3. Food was the first subject of temptation/testing

It easily becomes too important

We go for short-term pleasures (cf. sex)

John 6 – they were only interested in food

4. Food was the first things people fought over.

Food was meant to be shared

We won’t have mote than our share if…

My food is to do the will…

# (b) Edenhouse (Genesis 2—3)

[Not exactly a sermon but an alternative version of the Adam and Eve story written by Julia Bolden in a media workshop at St John’s Theological College, Nottingham, UK]

The time came when the Lord God formed a man’s body from the dust of the ground and breathed into it the breath of life, and the man became a living person. Then the Lord God built a house in the west, which he called Edenhouse. And he placed in the house the man he had formed.

The Lord ensured that the house was in perfect order, with electricity, central heating, and food and cooking equipment in the kitchen. He put all sorts of furniture in the house, and in the living room he put a television set with four channels. The Lord God placed the man in Edenhouse as its householder, to take care of it and to keep it in the order in which God himself had put it, but the Lord God gave the man this warning: “You may watch any of the programmes on the television, except for the fourth channel. This is the channel of the knowledge of good and evil. This you may not watch, for this channel will open your eyes, to make you aware of right and wrong, good and evil. If you watch this channel you will be doomed to die.”

The Lord decided that it was not good for the man to be alone, so he resolved to make a companion for him, a helper suited to his needs. So the Lord God formed from the soil every kind of machine. Among them was a washing machine for his clothes, an electric toaster for his breakfast, a typewriter for .his writing, a calculator for his calculations, and a record player and records for his entertainment. He brought them to the man to see what he would call them, and whatever he called them, that was their name. But still there was no proper helper for the man. He needed someone who could combine all the skills offered by the machines, and also be a companion for him. Then the Lord God caused the man to fall into a deep sleep, and he took one of his ribs, closed up the place from where he had taken it, and made the rib into a woman. “This is it”, Adam exclaimed. She is part of my own bone and flesh. Her name is woman, because she was taken from a man”. Now this explains why a man leaves his father and mother and is joined to his wife in such a way that the two become one person.

The house was just the right size for the two of them to live in, and it never occurred to either of them that it ought to be any larger. They had no need of money, for God had provided all that they required, but neither of them were aware of this. They had no reason to disagree with one another and nothing to fight for. They were completely satisfied, in their innocence.

Then one day a parrot flew into the house through the window. He was proud and was continually talking to himself and admiring himself in the mirror. In the evening, while the woman was in the kitchen, he spoke to her. “Not allowed to watch the tv, then?” “of course we’re allowed to watch it,” replied Eve. “It’s only the fourth channel that we’re forbidden to watch. God says that if we do we will die”. “Rubbish!”, squawked the parrot. “Won’t die! Won’t die! Rubbish! Understand! Eyes opened! Good and bad!”

The woman was convinced. She went into the living room, where Adam was, and switched channels. As she watched she saw a bright light appear in the centre of the screen. Adam was astonished by what he saw. As they watched, they heard a voice speaking to them from the set. “You are Adam and Eve, the first man and woman to be placed on the earth, but have you not noticed that God has you completely under his control? Are you content with what God has provided for you? Would you not prefer to have a larger house? Are there not more possessions you could have? Could you not be more successful in providing for yourselves? Do you not think you ought to have rights of your own which you could fight for?” As the voice went on, they saw the light on the screen grow larger and brighter until it almost blinded them.

Then they began to feel guilty. They switched off the set and ran and hid from the Lord, Eve in the kitchen under the table, Adam in the bedroom under the bed. Adam heard God’s footsteps on the stairs, approaching nearer and nearer, but there was no way of escape.

God entered the room and commanded Adam to come out from his hiding place, and Adam was forced to admit that he had been watching the forbidden fourth channel. “But”, he added, “it was the woman you gave me who switched it on”. The Lord entered the kitchen and spoke to Eve. He asked her, “How could you do such a thing?” “The parrot tricked me”, she replied. So the Lord God said to the parrot, “This is your punishment. No longer will you be free to fly around as you please. You will be kept in a cage and you will have to rely on human beings to provide you with food.” And to Adam God said, “Because you listened to your wife and watched the fourth channel when I told you not to, I have placed a curse on your head. You will have to struggle to build your own house and to earn enough money to support yourself and your wife. Finally you will return to the ground from which you came. For you were made from the ground, and to the ground you will return.”

Then the Lord God threw Adam and Eve out of Edenhouse, and locked and bolted the doors and took away the key and barred up the windows so that they could not return.

# (c) Cain and Abel (Genesis 4)

So Adam and Eve have been expelled from God’s garden and mysterious guardians and a flaming flash­ing sword bar the way to their return. Outside of Eden Adam makes love to his wife and Eve bears her first child. Sex and parenthood, love and family life, have been from the beginning two of the ways men and women have tried to escape from the facts about their loneliness in the world. In our culture, of course, we would resist any suggestion that only the man enjoyed the sexual relationship and only the woman enjoyed the baby. We are past that sexist stage: we are the new man and the new woman. But we are not past the stage of subconsciously hoping that our relationship with the one we love and our life as a family together might be the things that give some meaning to our life east of Eden.

‘With the help of Yahweh I have brought a man into being,’ says Eve (Gen. 4:1). It seems a strange way to put it. Admittedly there is a pun on Cain’s name here, and Eve has to speak in a slightly strange way to make the pun work. But that does not explain how strangely she speaks. ‘I have got a man with God.’ There is a pride in the fact, a pride in achievement, in creativity. It is pride with religious nobs on, of course, as our own pride is likely to be. Not that Eve did not mean what she said; she really was grateful to God for the gift of a child. But her language nevertheless gives her away. The same pride appears with a meaning of its own in Cain’s actual name. Cain is the Hebrew word for a craftsman, a smith, a creative person. Cain’s story begins with human beings attempting to make sense of life east of Eden, attempting to achieve, and it should be frightening us already.

Then ‘afterwards Eve had another child, Abel’ (4:2). That is a throw‑away line compared with the account of Cain’s origin. Perhaps people do remember their first baby more than their second, though I confess as a father I remember the way our second son almost emerged when my wife was still in the corridor of the maternity hospital in Nottingham, as vividly as I remember the way I drove through red lights in North London in the early hours lest I missed my first son being born in a maternity hospital there. After Cain there is Abel, with no explanation of the name. It does have a meaning, as the hearers of this story would know well enough. In scripture they have heard it most often in Ecclesiastes. ‘Vanity of vanities, says the Preacher. Everything is vanity’ (Eccl. 1:2). ‘Abel’ is an ordinary Hebrew word for vanity, emptiness, nothing­ness. Literally it means a mere breath, a puff of wind. It comes in Job and the Psalms, too, when they want to say that human beings and human life are as insubstantial as mere breath. Vanity, nothingness, a mere breath of wind is the name of Adam and Eve’s second baby. A frail, vulnerable person he will turn out to be. It will only take a breath of wind to blow him over. The two characters in this story are an achiever and a breath of wind. Yes, a frightening story it is being trailered to be.

So two sons grow up, with their destiny implicit in their names. There is Smith, the achiever, the man who bears the burden of his parents’ longing for meaning in their life east of Eden, the one who takes up the commission his father had received from God and begins the task of tilling the earth on behalf of the great master craftworker. And there is Vanity, the younger, the mere nothing, who keeps sheep.

The hearers of the story can guess in general terms how things will turn out. They know the attitude God takes to people who look as if they have everything going for them. Not that this means there is anything morally wrong with such people; it was not Smith’s fault that he was the elder and that everything in life should work in his favour. They just happen to be people whose lives cannot help giving the wrong impression about God, about what it means to be human, and about what counts. The hearers also know the attitude God takes to younger brothers and other people who look as if they do not count. Jacob and Esau, Joseph and his brothers, David and his brothers: there was little to commend Jacob, Joseph, and David to anyone (a swindler, a gasbag, and a murderer), but God takes and uses each one, partly in order to turn human opinions and evaluations upside down. The hearers know those stories. They know that a person such as Vanity whose very name says he is a nothing is likely to end up God’s favourite.

The terrible truth emerges from worship. Smith, the man whose name testifies to the way God was involved in his birth, the man whose work involves tilling the soil as his father had been told to do by God, naturally brings some of his produce to God, just the way Israelites later on did. Vanity limps behind as usual, but he does the equivalent out of his own work. He, too, brings the kind of offering an Israelite would, fat portions from some of the firstborn of his flock. And ‘Yahweh received Vanity and his gift with favour; but Smith and his gift he did not receive’ (Gen. 4:4-5).

Why? And how did they know? And what gave them the idea of making an offering, anyway? The story refuses to answer those questions. People have reckoned that we should infer something from the fact that Vanity offered fat portions of a sheep; but that might only imply that he was trying to outdo Cain, who was the person who took the original initiative in the matter of offering things to God. Leviticus in any case makes it clear that exactly the kind of offering Cain brings is one which does please Yahweh. The story does not make explicit why God accepted one offering and not the other. We can use it to illustrate the fact that what counts in our relationship with God is faith; the New Testament does so. But the story itself makes no point of that kind ‑‑ at least, not yet. It might even give the impression that things worked out the way they did simply because Abel was the younger son.

Neither does the story tell us how they knew that God accepted one and not the other. Did Smith’s sacrifice simply refuse to burn? Did Vanity’s flocks flourish more afterwards and Smith’s crops fail? Was it just that there was a beatific smile on Vanity’s face during the service, while Smith felt nothing, had no sense of God’s presence as they worshipped? All that we know is that they knew it was the case. God had been there, ignoring Smith, pleased with Vanity.

The fall and the first sin

Now we wait with bated breath. This is where the drama in the story starts. How will Cain react? ‘Cain was very angry and his face fell. Then the Lord said to Cain, Why are you so angry and cast down? If you do well, you are accepted; if not, sin is a demon crouching at the door. It shall be eager for you, and you will be mastered by it’ (Gen. 4:5-7).

So says the New English Bible, which is the translation used for this story in the Church of England’s *Alternative Service Book.* Now in a church to which I once belonged they had the NEB as the pew Bible, and certain preachers used regularly to play a game called ‘Let’s rubbish the NEB’ in which we pointed out how odd it was at this point or that. The authorities tried to ban this game, but eventually gave in and bought New International Versions instead. At this point the Cain and Abel story has two good examples of NEB oddness. But the general point is dear. It is that God’s accepting Abel in a way that does not extend to Cain is what brings to the surface questions about right and wrong in Cain’s attitude. But they are questions about the attitude he now takes, not the attitude he took before.

That is why it is so important not to get bogged down in the question why God accepted Abel and not Cain. To do so is to miss the point in the story, which is the issues that are raised for Cain when God accepts only Abel. It raises problems between Cain and God, and problems between Cain and his brother. For all we know from what we have been told in the story so far, Cain comes to worship in all love, gratitude, and dependence on God, the way we all hope to on a good day, and God spurns him. God blesses Abel and not him.

It is an experience we are familiar with ourselves, so that the questions God addresses to Cain are ones we also have to handle. Why does God bless her and not me? Why has he got the gift of an evangelist and I have not? Why has she got such a superb job in God’s service? Why has he got a job at all when I have not? Why is he such a success in Christian work? Why don’t I get chances like the ones she has? Why is their church growing in a way that ours is not? Why is she married and I am not? Why have they got children and we have not? Why does he look as if he is caught up into the third heaven in worship and I do not? Why does she get pictures and words from the Lord and I do not?

The moment when we start asking those questions is the moment when sin is crouching at the door like a demon lusting after us, threatening to master us. The language is the language of the Adam and Eve story again. There the marriage relationship gets turned into one where two people lust after each other and try to dominate each other (Gen. 3:16). That provides a picture of what the demon sin can start doing to us when we start asking ‘Why has God blessed him or her the way God has not blessed me?’

And in the way Genesis actually speaks, astonish­ingly this is the moment when sin is about to break out in the world. Theologically, of course, the Garden of Eden story was about the origin of sin in the world. Yet that is not the way God actually speaks. Indeed, at one level all that happened there was that some people stole God’s apples or ate from the wrong menu. Even though it was the terrible moment when humanity first asserted its autonomy from God and settled the world’s awful destiny, the word ‘sin’ was not used to describe what Adam and Eve did. Genesis 3 is in one sense not a story about ‘sin’. Something of a different order is now poking its head round the door. According to the Cain and Abel story, when ‘sin’ comes in, it is in connection with what we human beings do to each other. Because once we start asking the question ‘Why has she got what I have not got, why has God gifted him the way God has not gifted me?’ the demon resentment threatens to destroy other people through us. We might have made a better job than Adam and Eve of living with God; Adam and Eve were a bit pathetic, we may think. But living with other people....

In a parallel way, theologically Genesis 3 is the story of the ‘fall’, but in the Bible’s own way of speaking the ‘fall’ comes in Genesis 4, which is the story of the fall of a face and the fall of a person.

This is also the moment when a human being is challenged to make a choice, to exercise his human freedom. People often talk as if God gave human beings freedom in Genesis 2 in telling them to keep away from the orchard. That is not really so. In a sense God denies them freedom there, tells them what not to do and dares them to disobey ‑‑ and of course they do. Here in Genesis 4 is when we get the challenge to a human being to exercise his freedom. While he is the victim of birth into a sinful and fallen world, he is not treated as a mere hapless victim of original sin, but is challenged to accept responsibility for his reactions, for his resent­ment, and for his destiny. And of course he will not.

When our sons were small they would periodically complain in some situation, ‘It’s not fair’, and their father would respond, ‘Nothing’s fair’. Did God ever say that life would be fair? Cain complains at how unfair life is. His unfair experience and his complaint at it gives the demon sin access to his life and threatens to separate him from God. A great danger lies in the way a human being handles anger and resentment. It is a danger to other people and a danger to ourselves: it may destroy us, too.

God’s fundamental expectation of us is love ‑‑ love for God and love for other people. What is the cutting edge of love will vary in different situations. In the gospels, there are some interesting differences over what love and community mean. In Luke, for instance, the emphasis lies on sharing our possessions. In Matthew the emphasis lies on forgiveness and mercy; it is these that count, as opposed to resentment and grudge. For Cain the one thing that brought out whether he was a person of love or of hate was the fact that his brother got on with God better than he did.

The Cain and Abel story suggests how Matthew’s emphasis and Luke’s emphasis are related. A famous meditation by Paul on Jesus’s incarnation and death takes these events as a stimulus to our being willing to let someone else take what we have, even if it belongs to us and we treasure it, and even to rejoice that our loss is their gain. It involves an end of grasping and a beginning of emptying (see Phil. 2). Often one thing, something which is especially precious to us, will be the test whether we are willing to live by that principle. God asks just one thing. The trouble is that it is the most important thing, it is everything. How much energy do we use bottling up anger, Walter Brueggemann asks, because we cannot face Philippians 2?

God urges Cain to take responsibility for his grudg­ing. He must take responsibility for where he stands, otherwise there will be a fall. This fall will be essentially then a matter of relationships between human beings, relationships in the family, relationships in society. This fall has come about when a man is asked where his brother is and when he responds by declaring that it is not his business. The family that prays together slays together. I believe the statistics indicate that most murder is committed by people who know and are close to their victims. Is it not the people you are closest to that you have most opportunity and stimulus to come to hate? The story keeps rubbing in the fact that Cain and Abel are brothers; seven times in 11 verses the word comes.

Abel had done nothing to deserve Cain’s hatred except have God love him. God did not accept Cain’s offering, so Cain killed Abel. Cain takes Abel out into the open country where no one can see, out to where he can kill Abel and disguise it all as an accident in the way Joseph’s brothers in due course would. Except that there is no country open enough to escape God’s awareness. Where can Cain go from God’s spirit, where can he flee from God’s presence? God knew all about him from the beginning, knit him together in his mother’s womb as God and Eve cooperated in the shaping of Cain. God knows all about him, knows the terrible temptation that his rejection brought to Cain, knows how Cain might react, hears Abel’s terrible cry as God hears every cry of the oppressed. ‘Before him no creature is hidden, but all are open and laid bare to the eyes of him with whom we have to do’ (Heb. 4:13).

‘Why are you so angry and downcast?’ The failures and the rejections of life seem like the end of some story, but actually they are the beginning of a different story, the story of how we will live with rejection and failure, with God blessing other people the way we are not blessed. Will we let that experience twist us and turn us bitter in relation to God and smouldering in resentment towards other people?

‘Sin is a demon crouching at the door. It shall be eager for you and you will be mastered by it.’ That NEB translation actually involves emending the text, and every other translation and commentator agrees that the NEB is mistaken. God’s words are actually a challenge or an invitation or a promise to Cain. ‘It will be eager for you but you must master it’, or ‘you can master it’. The words are designed to bring Cain up short and open him up to the possibility of victory by God’s grace over the demon of resentment which imperils his relationship with God and with other people. That is what they are for us as modern readers of his story. But even if we fail, as Cain did, we have a promise in Hebrews to turn to. Even at the point which for poor Cain did mean defeat, indeed especially at that point, ‘we have a high priest who in every respect has been tempted as we are, yet without sinning. Let us then with confidence draw near to the throne of grace that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need’ (Heb. 4:15-16).

# (d) Praying For the City (Genesis 18)

(1) The background for this prayer is the oppressiveness of Sodom and the danger of its judgment (not sex). It is a city in a terrible mess.

Compare L.A. Health care. Books in schools. Wages. What we do to the rest of the world (e.g., corn in Mexico). But including the sex industry.

“Outcry.”

(2) God is involved – “God and see.” The angels finding “hospitality.”

(3) God draws Abraham into prayer (cf. the end of the prayer).

The background – “Shall I conceal from Abraham…?”

God draws us into decision-making for the world.

Why? Because God likes that.

Cf. creation.

We are called to be active, but also prayerful. Other people may act – no one else will pray.

(4) It’s our job in prayer to challenge God to be fair or merciful.

Cf. Moses, Amos.

It’s not arrogant – Abraham knows God is God.

Cf’ Jesus’s parable about the baker in bed.

Prayer for the righteous in relation to the wicked.

Lot!

Rather our fellow-believers.

(5) The answer may be different from what you think

# (e) Moses the Mediator (Exodus—Deuteonomy)

‘Call nobody happy till they are dead’, said the Greek statesman and poet Solon (see Herodotus, *Histories* 1.32). It was not a deeply morose statement about the intrinsic gloominess of human life, but a solemn recognition that for good as well as for ill, nothing is over until it is over. Years of joy and achievement can seem undone by a moment’s folly or tragedy. Even apart from such possibilities, it is only at the end of a person’s life that its shape can be discerned and an interim judgment on its significance made. The example of Moses well shows how even that is indeed preliminary, because an assessment of the man’s achievement has to take into account what he has been to Jewish and Christian history since. But it also shows how the moment of death is a natural moment to consider the significance of the life as a whole. There are biblical characters whom we meet for a moment in the middle of their lives without ever knowing where they came from or how their lives went on. There are people whose birth and/or death is briefly noted, but as no more than episodes in a broader story of which they are a small part. There are one or two people like Moses for whom we get the frame of a life story, and whose death story provides the vantage point from which to look back over the whole.

When a relationship is established between people, usually it comes about partly through another person. Somebody introduces them to each other, acting as mediator between them. There came to be a special relationship between Yahweh and Israel ‑ Yahweh is their God, Israel is Yahweh’s people ‑ and they, too, had someone who acted as their go‑between, often getting caught in the cross‑fire between them. We learn a lot about what went on between Moses and God, mostly in connection with describing his role in the joys and the agonies of the relationship between God and Israel. His spirituality, as we learn of it, is the spirituality of a mediator.

How the mediator received God’s call

So Jacob and his family find their fortune in Egypt. Then in due course a new government comes to power and the flourishing of this immigrant community begins to frighten it. The government seeks to contain it, but immigrant communities have a way of flourishing in numbers all the more when you try to put them down.

First it is compulsion to engage in particular tough jobs. Next they are confined to hard labour. Neither works. Then the government determines to restrict their population growth, requiring the killing of male babies at birth. It is often the case that women (and children) pay the consequences for laws made by men. But more covertly they sometimes hold power, and can exercise it in a way which subverts male power, courageously, subtly, and where necessary manipulatively. They look weak, but they achieve. The men of Egypt are motivated by fear of the men of Israel, the women motivated by fear of God, and they let the babies live. But that only issues in another edict, that the babies be subsequently drowned. The story recalls stories from our own age about the oppression of peoples in Latin America, Eastern Europe, and China, peoples who have sometimes found this story a mirror in which to find themselves.

Moses came to be involved with Israel as someone who shared their oppression. He was the baby who should never have lived (Exod. 2:1‑.1O). He was born as an ordinary child of just an ordinary marriage, but in a grievously non‑ordinary time. Moses’ mother resists the law of infanticide, then in due course turns the baby’s basket into a makeshift boat and floats it onto the Nile. We cannot tell whether this is an act of faith (‘God will look after him’), of despair (‘There’s no way he can escape death, but I refuse to do the deed myself’), or of calculation (‘I’ll leave him where he will get picked up’). The story’s implicit interest lies in the way God’s providence works via the natural feelings of a mother, the natural curiosity of a child who stays by the river to see what happens to the boat, and the natural com­passion of a princess who cannot resist a baby and ends up asking his own mother to look after him for her.

The story thus hints at the characteristically fragile beginning of God’s plan to give Israel its freedom and its special relationship with God, like that in Jesus ‘s story where he, too, becomes the sole survivor of a holocaust wrought by an imperious overlord of Israel (Matt. 2) (B. S. Childs). It will not have seemed fair on the children of Israel and their parents in either context, but a positive purpose of God was at work, first to circumvent human evil, then to defeat it. So as a hidden, overruling activity of God on the national scale had ensured that Israel grew rather than perished at an earlier stage of the pogrom (Exod. 1), so now on the personal scale it arranges for Israel’s potential liberator to acquire the Egyptian upbringing which will presumably turn out useful when he is called to take on the Egyptian authorities himself. He becomes the person who could be the liberator because on the one hand he was connected with the slaves but on the other had not been brought up with them.

A story from his manhood then tells us that Moses is called as an impetuous activist who knew the positive and the negative side to that (2:11‑22). Moses’ name was Egyptian (compare names such as Tutmoses; the comment in 2:10 depends on a play on words in Hebrew), his upbringing was Egyptian, and his appearance was Egyptian (2:19). He did not have to see himself as an Israelite (he could be seen as an Egyptian collaborator), but he did. Perhaps the years of courtly upbringing had been years of seething, or perhaps he had never realized how his own people lived until he witnessed the scene which made him burst out into savage action and kill an Egyptian who was beating one of his countrymen, after which he has to flee for his life into the desert. Moses is no haloed saint but a real man, a person in whom courage, compassion, fieriness, enthusiasm, and impetuosity combine in a volatile mixture as he pursues the love‑hate relationship with his people and his destiny which this first incident from his manhood prefigures.

It turns him into a refugee miles away in Sinai. If a person tainted by collaboration with the Egyptians is not the obvious person to mediate between God and Israel, neither is a failed activist turned exile. If he spent his youth learning to be somebody, he spent his best adult years as a nobody, a man who was finished. Yet Midian, too, was preparing him for his calling. It will also be useful that he is a man at home in the desert as well as at home at court. It is this period that turns awareness of his brother and sister Israelites’ experience of being status‑less and home‑less into an experience of his own. He marries, and calls his son Gershom, a name which suggests that he still sees himself as ‘An-alien-there’, in a foreign land: he has learnt a form of contentment and acceptance, though without settling down (Or losing the fieriness, as later stages in the story will make clear). Preparation for God’s service is likely to involve some form of Egypt and some form of Midian.

When Moses’ call came, it was as part of God’s response to his people’s groaning. The descendants of Abraham have become a despised underclass in Egypt, and in their oppression they cry out to God. God hears their cry, God remembers the covenant promise made to their ancestors, God sees their present situation, and God takes notice (Exod. 2:23‑25). And that is how Moses comes to have God appear to him. He finds himself given a ministry, not so that he can find fulfilment or find expression of his gifts or calling. It was not for his sake at all. It was a response to Israel’s groaning. It is a groan Moses will hear a lot of.

Moses is an Egyptian ‑ but is not. He is an Israelite ‑ but is not. He is a Midianite ‑ but is not. One day he is out doing his job in the context of his life in a Midianite family. He is not seeking God, but he has ventured near God’s mountain. Perhaps it was not so surprising that he found himself meeting God, but if he knew it was God’s mountain, to judge from how things work out this does not seem to make him expect to meet God there (it was his father‑in‑law who was the priest, after all). As with Jacob, there is no suggestion that he was seeking God or took any initiative in relation to God. But in the context of his everyday work experience he had an experience of mystery, of God’s nearness. If he had been waiting for 40 years for something to happen, now it happens at an unlikely time, in an unlikely way.

He sees a flame of fire. Fire is a symbol of deity. It suggests light, heat, danger, destruction, cleansing. But it appears in the midst of a desert bush, something lowly and ordinary. A part of God’s creation burns with divine flame without being consumed.

But that is to anticipate. Moses just sees a little bush on fire. He might have ignored it. His call, and all that follows, starts with mere curiosity about an odd fire. His curiosity was his main contribution to his call. Without it, nothing else would have followed. I imagine there was many a moment over the decades that followed when he wished he had never looked. When his curiosity is attracted, God immediately seeks to take him beyond it. On the one hand, God summons him by name, implicitly drawing him near. On the other, God warns him to stop, to come no closer. When God really appears and acts, people feel drawn and at the same time feel they have to draw back. But God’s response to Moses’ fear is to bring good news ‑ not news that immediately relates to Moses in person but news that God is coming to deliver Moses’ people. God has heard that cry of anguish and resentment at the way they are being treated. God is about to take action, to give evidence that it is indeed possible to mobilize the divine bias to the poor which we noted God once showed *to* an Egyptian, Hagar. ‘If we pray, the Holy Spirit will come down’, says a Zimbabwean song (born of an oppression by Britain that will have felt similar to Israel’s by Egypt). It sounds manipulative, but the kind of prayer God invites us into looks manipulative: ‘Come on, mobilize me!’

If Moses had time, perhaps he wondered why God was telling *him* about all this. The reason soon appears, and it seemed less good news. The reason is that God intends to send Moses to the Pharaoh to bring the Israelites out of Egypt. It would have been easy for God to act direct, to do a miracle, to transport the people in an instant by magic carpet from Nile to Jordan. God chooses to work less directly, to use human instru­ments, to act in a way that may astonish but in general does not actually compel anyone to believe that God was involved. But in reality in the story of the last third of Moses’ life which is now beginning, God will do nothing without Moses being involved. The story also points to the fact that conversely God rarely appears to anyone without its being in some way an enlistment into God’s service.

So God summons Moses to get involved in politics in order to bring freedom and justice to his people. One might have expected the Moses who behaved as he did when he saw his fellow‑countryman being beaten to regard this as rather good news, but sometimes people are much less confident or more realistic at 50 than they are at 25, and so it is with Moses. ‘How can I do that?’: it is not the Moses who took decisive action that day long ago. God’s response to his hesitation might be a rebuke, but there is no compelling reason to read it that way. ‘I will be with you, says God. It is a promise that belongs in moments of great challenge like that one when Jesus is about to make his final disappearance leaving his disciples with the challenge to make disciples of the whole world (when Jesus himself has not even succeeded in connection with Israel after God had been preparing them for a thousand years or so). It is always sobering when God says ‘I am with you’: it probably means God is about to tell us of some awesome expectation. Mary knew well to be scared when an angel told her that the Lord was with her (Lk. 1:29‑30).

The back‑up promise that God will be with Moses is given more specific content by the further back‑up promise that he will see the people worship God on this very mountain where he and God are now conversing. That will be the sign that he really is the person who will lead the Israelites out of Egypt. But do you call that a sign? I have seen more convincing signs on a French autoroute. A sign is supposed to provide you with grounds for believing that something implausible will actually happen. This is a sign that Moses will see only at the end of the process. In the meantime he still has to live by faith. His sign is no present proof that God really has spoken or really will act. Only later will Moses know in experience. In the meantime he has to walk in moment‑by‑moment trust.

Moses is therefore pardonably unsatisfied. ‘When I go to the Israelites and tell them of this great plan, what do I say if they ask me who this God is?’ Again God’s answer reveals less than it conceals, though it thereby manages to be the more profound. God is ‘I will be’: whatever happens and whatever is needed, God will be there, present, active and involved. That is the kind of God we are talking about when we talk about Yahweh, the God of Israel.

‘What if they won’t listen?’ ‘I will give them other signs.’ ‘But I’m no good at rhetoric, I’m no persuader.’ ‘I’ll tell you what to say.’ ‘O, couldn’t you send someone else?’ There are signs as the exchange unfolds that God is getting impatient, and now enough has become enough. God does not exactly give up; Moses will have Aaron’s assistance, but Moses will not escape. It is extraordinary that the story of Israel’s great leader begins with such a reminder of his feet of clay, which underlines for good and for ill the relative insignificance of Israel’s human leadership. God will accept responsibility for Israel’s response to Moses, for providing Moses with the words, and for seeing that he has the support he needs for his task.

What the mediator does

A mediator is a go‑between or someone who builds bridges. Moses built bridges between Israel and Yahweh.

One aspect of this concerned the gap between the people’s weakness and God’s strength. After their escape from the Egyptians they found themselves in conflict with the Amalekites. There was to be a high-noon battle for which Moses with Aaron and Hur climbed to the top of a mountain overlooking the battle scene. There, holding Yahweh’s staff, Moses stands extending his hand over the battlefield. As long as he does so, Israel does well in battle; when his arm tires, Israel is threatened with defeat. In due course Aaron and Hur have the wit to prop up his ailing arms and keep his hands extended until the battle is over (Exod. 17).

If the story is an example of intercessory prayer, its picture of prayer is rather different from ours. Intercession is distinguishable from action, but it involves not retreating from the scene of action but remaining personally identified with it. As is regularly the case in scripture, Moses prays not hands together, head down, and eyes shut, but hands upraised, head up, and eyes alert to see what is happening. In regular prayer in scripture people’s hands are open to receive from God, but in this instance Moses with God’s staff in his hand is more the general directing the battle from above. He is directing not merely earthly forces (Joshua is doing that) but heavenly forces. Israel is weak but in heaven there are vast resources potentially able to defeat the forces arrayed against Israel, and Moses builds the bridge between their weakness and God’s strength.

Another aspect of the building of bridges between people and God involves the gap between their creatureliness and God’s awesomeness. In due course the Israelites reach the mountain where Moses himself had had his awesome meeting with Yahweh. There Yahweh appears ‑ or rather mercifully fails to appear, but provides the resonances of the divine presence in thunder, lightning, smoke, earthquake, and dense cloud which particularly symbolizes the presence of the hidden God. Some moral preparation and some symbolic preparation are appropriate (Exod. 19:3‑8,10‑15). Hebrews 12 draws a contrast between this experience of God and the experience of the Christian community, but it is a different contrast from the one often inferred. Hebrews does not comment on how fortunate we are that we no longer experience God as shaking the earth or consum­ing with fire. It rather notes how more solemn is our position in being confronted by a God who shakes not only earth but heaven and who is still a consuming fire before whom awed reverence is the appropriate atti­tude. The awe of Sinai and some more are appropriate.

‘You speak to us and we will listen’, the people say to Moses. ‘Don’t let God speak to us, or we will die.’ The presence of God is too electric for creatureliness to be able to withstand its voltage. So Moses climbs Sinai to meet God on the people’s behalf. He is no less of a creature, and no less of a sinner, so the risk is as great for him as for them. He climbs Sinai not in order to make his own pilgrimage but to seek God on his people’s behalf, to learn so that he could teach. He descends with shining face, for he has met with God. He has not seen God’s face, for he could no more stand that experience than Israel could, but the fire of God’s face has affected his own. He is willing to be the go-between in relation to their creatureliness and God’s awesomeness.

He also builds bridges between their failure and God’s rejection of them. There is a tragic and fearful irony about what was happening at the bottom of the mountain while Moses was at the top. God was speaking of the right way of worship, of the shrine with its altar (but no image, for that was forbidden), of the people giving their gold and other precious possessions for it to be made, of burnt offerings and peace offerings being made there. God was promising to come to dwell there and enjoy fellowship with the people, in fulfil­ment of the purpose that lay behind their being delivered from oppression. Precisely while God is speaking of all this, it is being turned upside down at the foot of the mountain (Exod. 32:1‑8). Which leads Moses into this further form of bridge‑building.

God’s inclination is to abandon them and start again with Moses, but Moses does not rejoice in judgment even though he is exempted. His reaction is to seek to act as go‑between for the unfaithful people and the offended God. When the boss is about to take decisive action and grasp a nettle, it is sometimes the secretary’s task to risk the boss’s wrath by saying ‘Are you sure that’s wise or necessary? Does it really fit in with the policies you’ve been pursuing? Won’t it rebound on you? Does it really fit in with what you have said you would do? Shouldn’t you sleep on it?’ And sometimes the wise boss takes notice. Indeed, one reason (maybe subconscious) for telling the secretary what was to happen was to try out ideas, to invite a response, to involve this other person in the decision‑making. All that is paralleled in God’s dealings with Moses and Moses’ dealings with God.

Of course one reason why the boss talks things through with the secretary is the conviction that the two of them really do share convictions and aims. As the go­between, Moses is identified with both sides, and in his words to God his identification with God is at least as overt as his identification with Israel. The same is more obviously true about his actions when he reaches the bottom of the mountain, breaking the stones inscribed with the terms of the relationship between Yahweh and Israel which Israel has already broken and inviting Israelites into a sample wreaking of the bloody ven­geance from which he had dissuaded Yahweh. Then, remarkably, he returns to the top of the mountain to plead with Yahweh again (32:30‑34).

‘You have sinned a great sin.’ No doubt it was easier at that moment than it often is to recognize that fact and to bring it out into the open. Usually things are more ambiguous and we have more opportunity to avoid doing that. But it was because Moses could not shut his eyes to the people’s unfaithfulness and the obstacle this had placed between them and God, that Moses was also in no danger of being unable to see the nature of their need. People’s sins need acknowledging so that they can be prayed about ‑ so that we can function as the go-between in prayer. As the go‑between, Moses has to be able to understand both sides in the conflict, and this underlies the combination of hesitancy and bravado in his conversation with Yahweh. On one hand, it is ‘If you will only forgive their sin. . . ‘: the sentence runs out like that, unable quite to finish. On the other hand, what happens when it fails to finish is that it somersaults into chutzpah: ‘If you are not going to forgive them, you can also blot me out of your book’ (the citizen list of Yahweh’s people and/or the heavenly corporate plan for the next millennium or so). ‘If you won’t have them, you cannot have me.’ There is a touch of ‘Mind your own business about how I run things’ in Yahweh’s response to Moses, yet also an implicit ‘Yes’ interwoven with the ‘No’: Yahweh commissions Moses to lead the people on, which implies an acceptance of his plea for them. They will not be cast off.

The conversation illustrates how God involves us in the process of decision‑making. The ultimate objectives in the heavenly corporate plan may not be very negotiable; God’s mind is made up about some things (sustaining the world, blessing Israel, building up the church). But the aims and the detailed processes whereby these objectives will be realized are continually up for negotiation (which is why biblical, Jewish, and Christian history is such a winding phenomenon), and prayer is the way in which we engage in discussion with heaven about the specifics of the current situation (of course, heaven is receiving proposals from many subcommittees in this way, and has to make decisions in the light of all these submissions, so that the decisions are bound to disappoint some). Moses invites us as fellow go‑betweens into the essential combination of tentativeness and bravado which avoids the demonic alternatives of paralysis and arrogance.

The process continues with Moses’ third prayer, which focuses more on his own ministry (Exod. 33:12­23). Able only to have Moses by also having Israel, Yahweh does want Moses to continue to lead the people. Moses wants to know how he is to do that, what support he will have, what evidence he can have that Yahweh loves him and cares about him and will keep faith with him, and he also asks, ‘Consider too that this nation is your people’. This looks like reopening a question Yahweh seems just to have dosed. Even when we think we have been allowed to perceive what God is going to do, this does not necessarily mean we have to accept this as God’s final word. It implicitly leaves us free to speak again; which Moses does, and finds that Yahweh is flexible and unthreatened enough to do a complete U‑turn and say a straight ‘Yes’. And that leads to Moses praying another prayer of extraordinary boldness. He wants to see God’s glory, the visible shining splendour of God’s own personal nature and presence. That will be evidence that he is supported and accompanied in his task. That receives a ‘No’, but it is a ‘No, but . . . .’ You would not be able to bear the sight of my splendour. But I will let you see the afterburn. Let that be enough.

In his ministry Moses also builds bridges between faith and obedience and between spirit and institution. It has been suggested that in scripture as a whole and in Christian history there is a line that includes Abraham, Paul, Luther, and Protestantism in general, which puts the emphasis on faith in our relationship with God, and a line that includes Moses, Peter, James, Calvin, and also both Judaism and Catholicism, which puts the emphasis on obedience. Put as starkly as that, the grid may seem rather quaint, but there is something in it. Paul himself is certainly interested in the relationship between Abraham and Moses and emphasizes the fact that Abraham came first, so that the promise to Abraham which depends on grace cannot be made retrospectively conditional on the obligations revealed through Moses. But once that point is made and safeguarded, the question about obedience, response, and covenant obligation can be handled. And that is part of the bridge‑building significance of Moses as the figure who comes after Abraham.

The related antithesis is that between spirit and institution. Moses has links with the past, with tradition; Abraham had none. Abraham has his eyes wholly on the future; Moses also has his eyes to the past. For Abraham, God is always on ahead of the people, pursuing a fulfilment of the promise which lies predominantly in the future. For Moses, God is also in the midst of the people; he builds the tabernacle as the place where God will be known in the midst, a place of priesthood and sacrament which mean that, whereas for Abraham, that presence of God is always a matter of promise, for Moses, there is a sense in which it has now become guaranteed (whether or not it was always felt).

The price the mediator pays

Being a go‑between involves seeing things from two sides, identifying with both. For Moses, it means standing both on God’s side, and on the side of the people. The trouble is, that means that in reality you truly belong to neither side. The story of his journeys up and down the mountain hints at the way in which Moses himself stands on his own.

One of the features of the age in which we live is that leadership can get away with nothing. In state and church there is a widespread disillusion with leadership, and the disillusion is expressed not merely behind closed doors but openly and persistently with a naivety which hides from the fact that replacing the leadership will solve nothing because any new leadership will be just as human and fallible. One is astonished that anyone still wishes to be a politician or a bishop or the minister of a congregation. It is then striking and comforting that Moses had the same experience. As far as we know, the kings and priests of Israel did not have this experience (except behind closed doors, no doubt) ‑ which is one reason why God had to arrange for critique through prophets. They belonged to Israel’s Constantinian age, when church, state, and power were nicely one and the wise kept quiet. Moses lived in Israel’s pre‑Constantinian age and we live in the West’s post‑Constantinian one; perhaps that explains this link between our age and that of Moses. He had no institutional position; his leadership always depended on consensus.

He knew it would be so from the beginning; the issue underlies those questions he raised with God at Mount Horeb. It dominates a whole series of stories from after the people’s escape from Egypt. The Egyptian army is in hot pursuit and God directs the Israelites into a cul-de-sac. Rather understandably the Israelites turn on their human leadership. ‘Was it because there were no graves in Egypt that you have brought us out to die in the desert? We told you it would be like this. It would have been better to be slaves to the Egyptians than corpses in the desert.’ ‘Do not be afraid, stand firm, and see the deliverance Yahweh will accomplish for you today.’ It might have seemed a creditably courageous reply. Yet Yahweh in person intervenes with ‘Why are you crying out to me? Tell the Israelites to advance’ (Exod. 14:11‑15). Yes, Moses stands on his own in a category of one, with the Israelites saying ‘Why’ on one side, and God saying ‘Why’ on the other side.

It all works out fine, unless you are an Egyptian. The other side of the Red Sea they set out through the wilderness of Shur and have the first of a series of experiences which will typify life for some years and are presumably given such space there in the story because they continued to typify Israel’s life (15:22‑27). An experience of triumph and of proving God’s power is followed by an apparent let‑down: there is no water. The feeling of let‑down is compounded when they seem to find the solution and it turns out to be a disappointment: the water they find is polluted. The calling of God’s people in this situation is to keep trusting, but the natural reaction is to complain. Often this complaint is expressed as a murmur against their leadership, which is easier than outwardly complaining directly against God. The wise leader knows what to do, to turn not in complaint but in plea to the God who ‑ as Israel has proved already ‑ hears the cry of the needy. God meets the people’s need through a typically implausible route, directing Moses to throw a tree branch into the water, which purifies it. The occasion of disappointment and failure thus becomes in God’s grace the means of teaching and new revelation, of Yahweh as healer. Then, the other side of Marah (Bitter) is always an Elim, a place with twelve springs and seventy palms to take shade under.

A whole series of such stories follows in Exodus and Numbers, and in the end in some mysterious way it is these events which issue in the grievous fact that Moses himself never enters the promised land, any more than the rest of the exodus generation does. Yahweh determines that Moses must die within sight of the land, but without setting foot there. Yahweh’s explanation speaks of Moses and Aaron themselves having broken faith on one of those occasions when Israel rebelled against its lot. They failed to maintain Yahweh’s holiness ‑ failed to let God be God (Deut. 32:48‑52). The occasion took place in the Wilderness of Zin, near the end of the people’s 40 years in the wilderness. Neither the people’s words nor Moses’ reaction looks more than marginally different from other occasions, but it seems that both for Moses and for God there was something final about it, and God declares, ‘because you did not trust in me, to show my holiness before the eyes of the Israelites, you are not to bring this assembly into the land that I have given them’ (Num. 20:12). The way that Moses himself twice expresses it subsequently, he could not lead them into the land because Yahweh was angry with him ‘on account of the people’ (Deut. 1:37; 3:26). As Psalm 106 puts it, ‘They angered Yahweh at the waters of Meribah, and it went ill with Moses on their account, because they made his spirit bitter and he spoke words that were rash’. The people’s sin is the cause of Moses’ sin, and Moses pays the price for his sin.

So Moses suffers for them, but he is unable to avert tragedy for them. And although he gets them to the edge of the promised land, the price is not entering it himself. He dies before reaching his goal. Someone else takes them there. And that means that Moses’ experience points to something less peculiar to him. Moses ‘is on the track of Canaan all his life; it is incredible that he should see the land only when on the verge of death. This dying vision of it can only be intended to illustrate how incomplete a moment is human life . . . . Moses fails to enter Canaan not because his life is too short but because it is a human life’ (quoted by Gros Louis in *Literary Interpretations of Biblical Narratives*, Vol. 1, p. 129, from Franz Kafka’s *Diaries* 1914‑1923, pp. 195‑96).

Moses stands for the incompleteness of all human achievement, the tragic dimension to human experience, the need to say ‘Yes’ to God in the most difficult of circumstances. He fails to enter the land precisely because he is Israel’s leader. Taking the people to the edge of the land is his superhuman achievement; failing to enter the land is the reminder that he is human like them, and has failed like them (but his symbolic significance means he is not let off as they are). It is he above all who has to embody the fact that the future belongs to others.

Moses is a real human being, a person of huge achievement, huge failure, and huge disappointment. When the moment of death arrives he is at peace because all is within God’s purpose and he goes to die with God (and we know, to live with God). And we are at peace as we read the story because we know that Israel’s future does not depend on Moses but on God, and that the vital achievements of Moses were to take the people to this point and then to leave them with God, with Joshua, and with the word of God which he spent his last days re‑preaching for them (in Deuteronomy) so that it, not he, can be the basis of the life they are to live the other side of the Jordan. It is a shame that Moses cannot enter the land, but it is a wonder that he achieved so much.

So Moses climbs Mount Nebo. He is aware what this moment means: he is going there to die. After that is only the tedium of Sheol ‑ so he thinks. His eyes’ last sight is the land of his people’s destiny. There is a certain pain in surveying it, as Abraham once had from the mountains the other side (see Gen. 13:14‑18); Abraham had had to leave the full possession of it to others, too. Yet there is also certainly a sweetness about doing so: he has seen it with his own eyes.

Thus Moses dies there ‘according to Yahweh’s word’ ‑ another bitter‑sweet phrase. They are hard words: could not Yahweh have allowed this so faithful servant to set foot in the land? Was that one slip not forgivable? Yet they are reassuring words. Moses’ God is love, and the loving God’s will can be accepted. As far as Israel is concerned, Moses simply disappears. They cannot even find his grave. But there is therefore no danger of an excessive reverence being shown to his memory. Let the memorial be not the place where he died but the stature and achievement of the man himself, a man full of years, sight unimpaired, energy unabated, unequaled for his closeness to God and for his signs and wonders and mighty deeds and terrifying displays of power. He was 120 when he died (110 was the traditionally really impressive age, reached by Joseph, so he beat that): 40 years learning to be somebody, 40 years learning to be nobody, 40 years showing what God can do with somebody who has learned to be nobody.

# (f) Five Amazing Things You Can Tell God Not To Do (Exodus 32)

Some while ago I remember being puzzled when I read one or two books about preaching, because they had chapters in them on titles for sermons. A title for a sermon was something I had never felt the need of. Then on a visit to the USA I think I discovered the answer, that you advertise in the local newspaper not only the times of next Sunday’s services but the subjects of the sermons. It seemed to me a wondrous expectation, that not only should you have a striking title for the sermon, but that you should have it by the Wednesday before you were due to preach it. Both of these I would normally find difficult.

On this occasion, at last, I would be able to fulfil the requirement, because this sermon is about “five amazing things that you can tell God not to do”. A colleague of mine once preached a sermon about the ten bad habits of God, and these are partly related (God is always late, is unpredictable, does not care what people think, has a love which is blind, prefers the broken to the strong, is self-contradictory, does not remember evil and personally repents of evil, is faithful but has changes of mind, is paradoxical, and behaves like a child).

The five amazing things you can tell God not to do come in a prayer of Moses in Exodus 32. There is Moses on the top of the mountain with God, receiving instructions about the way the relationship between God and Israel is to work out, and what is to be the pattern of worship, and how God and Israel are to relate to each other. There at the same time at the bottom of the mountain is Israel itself, rather impatient about how long Moses is going to be delaying at the top of this mountain and deciding that it will exercise some creative initiative, indulge in some innovative liturgical development, in connection with the question of how God and Israel will relate and how Israel will worship. Ironically, there at the bottom of the mountain is Israel doing exactly the opposite to what God is telling Moses at the top of the mountain.

It leads Moses into having to pray for the people.

First, he says, “Don’t lose your temper”. “Why should your anger burn against your people, whom you brought out of Egypt with great power and a mighty hand?’

It seems strange to think of God getting angry. There are at least two important and precious implications in the fact that God does. One is that it means that God is a real person. God is someone with feelings and passions such as compassion and mercy. God is someone who loves and cares, who joys and delights, who gets jealous and gets angry. God is not a kind of abstract entity up there on the top of the mountain or an impassive monarch sitting on a throne in heaven, untouched by anything. God is not an idea, nor merely the ground of my being. God is a person with passions, and therefore among the passions anger, wrath, a temper to lose. And that is part of God’s being the one in whose image we are made.

I suspect that the Israelites talked about God being angry because that was often how it seemed to be, to judge from what happened to them. You know when someone is angry with you: you have got cuffed about the ear, and you know there is probably something behind that. Things go wrong in your life, or in the world, or in the church, and you infer that God must be angry. Then you either try to infer the rational explanation for that, and repent, or you conclude that there is no rational explanation, and you say “Come on, stop it”, as Job did.

If we look at the world and the church as we know it, it would be a reasonable inference that God is angry. Perhaps that is why world and church (in Europe and America, at least) are in such a mess. We easily accept the fact that the church is so decimated and insignificant and we shrug our shoulders, instead of asking whether God is angry. What we should be doing is challenging God about letting the church be the laughing stock of the nation, as it often seems to be. Instead, we simply accept it or shuffle about it, or try to do our best, our really pathetic best, to do something about it. Perhaps what we should be doing is what Moses does, saying to God “Why are you losing your temper?” We might even get a response.

Moses’ second challenge to God is, “Don’t give up on us”. Don’t give up on the project that you have begun. “Why should your anger burn against your people, whom you have brought out of Egypt with great power and a mighty hand?” You have only started the job. You said you were going to take us into the land you promised us. You said that you were going to enter into a relationship with us. You said that you were going to provide the world with a model of what it was like to be the people of Yahweh. You are not going to give up on the job, are you? You are not going to give up on us, are you? You can’t do that.

Again I suggest that if we look at a world and a church where it can seem as if God has given up on us, then Moses’ kind of prayer may be one we should be praying. Why give up on the church? One can think of umpteen reasons for doing so. “But don’t give up on the church. The job is only half done, Lord.”

“Don’t give up on me.’ I would give up on me. Moses invites us to challenge God about giving up when the task is only half-completed, with regard to the world, the church, or individuals such as ourselves.

Moses’ third challenge is, “Don’t give the wrong impression”. It continues from the second. “Why should the Egyptians say, ‘It was with evil intent that Yahweh brought them out, to kill them in the mountains and to wipe them off the face of the earth.’” Think of the kind of impression you would be conveying to the world, to the whole of creation. Think of your own reputation. It is one of the standard bases upon which prayers in the Bible appeal to God. We ask God to do things “for God’s glory”; that might seem a somewhat selfish basis of appeal. It is “for your name’s sake”, lest people think badly of you. The people in the Bible are totally unscrupulous in prayer. They will do anything to get God to do the things that are near God’s own heart and God’s own agenda, to get God motivated to act. “You cannot cast us off at this moment and give the impression that you could not do the job after all, that you were not capable of bringing a people into a relationship with yourself and into their promised land, even if you were capable of bringing them out of Egypt.

And “Don’t be inflexible.” Turn from your fierce anger. Change your mind and do not bring disaster on your people. The Old Testament is not at all afraid of the notion of God having a change of mind. Readers of the Bible again shuffle about this, as if God should not have to do a thing like that. Perhaps part of what lies behind it is this. Anyone who is involved in leadership knows that most of the time the kind of decisions that you are taking are not made clearly on the basis of this being one-hundred-per-cent-obviously the right action, or even ninety-per-cent-obviously the right action. They are often made on a basis of sixty-forty, if you are lucky, or 51-49. And God is in the same position as anyone else with regard to this. God is always having to choose between the least calamitous courses of action.

So it does not take much to push God from 51 to 49. God had decided to do this, but was only a percentage point away from doing the other. “Could you not reconsider the basis on which you have made that decision? Could you not just change those figures around? Don’t be the kind of person who, once they have made a decision, won’t reconsider. Politicians let themselves be caught in a bind in this way, as if changing one’s mind is a weakness. Being prepared to change your mind is a strength (well, admittedly, not if you do it all the time). To be flexible is a strength.

So one of the things that is going on in prayer is that we are indeed asking God to do something different from what God was going to do. Indeed, if that is not part of what is going on in prayer, then there is no point in prayer. The point of this kind of prayer is to get God to do something that otherwise God would not do, or not to do something that otherwise God would do. When we are asking God to do things, it is an activity which is designed to make a difference. We are saying to God “Don’t be inflexible. Change your mind. Do something different from what you intended”.

Ann and I once invited a friend of ours to come on holiday with us, and she declined because she could not really afford it and she did not want to come without paying every penny of her way. The next year she could afford it and came, and we also invited another friend. This second friend seemed likely to decline for the same reason, but our first friend urged us to try to persuade her, not to take “No” for an answer. I expostulated “But you wouldn’t come last year!” “You didn’t try to persuade me”, she said. I had given in, taken “No” for an answer. I would not do it again with her, or with God.

Fifthly, “Don’t forget your word”. “Remember your servants Abraham, Isaac, and Israel, to whom you swore by your own self: "I will make your descendants as numerous as the stars in the sky and I will give your descendants all this land I promised them, and it will be their inheritance for ever”.

God has made some promises and what Moses is doing in prayer is reminding God of these promises. Talk of “claiming” things from God can sound questionable, but there is something to it. You are battering on God’s door or upon God’s chest and saying “We will not allow you to forget the words that you have uttered to us about your intentions. We will not allow you to forget your promises”. What we are doing in prayer is reminding God of commitments that God has undertaken, that God cannot get off the hook of.

And Yahweh had a change of mind about the disaster that was planned for the people. If we want to be philosophical (in a certain sort of way), of course, we can say that God knew ahead of time that the moment would come for a change of mind and that it was all part of a plan. We may prefer to safeguard God’s sovereignty in this way. But the Bible does not do so. More often what the Bible does is lay the story out as a story, lay it out in narrative order, lay it out as history. It then portrays God’s response to Moses as a real response. We are not told in brackets “Now of course God knew ahead of time that Moses would pray that way, and God had made allowance for that”. If this had been so, would God’s response really have been a response? In the story the Bible tells, it was a real response. What is going on in prayer is that God is involving us in the process of decision-making whereby things happen in the world. It is not the case that God decided by fiat ahead of time, before Day Six of creation as it were, what was to happen in each of the umpteen trillion years that was now to unfold. It is the case that God decided to create some people who would indeed be made in God’s image, with the characteristics of God, and would then be drawn into the project that God was initiating at the moment of creation. And prayer is one of the ways in which they would be drawn into the fulfilment of that project in the world.

That is why, if we do not say things in prayer, things do not happen. Perhaps that is why history has gone on for such a long time. That is why church history has gone on for such a long time. That is why Israel’s history went on for such a long time. God never found that anyone suggested the right action at the right moment. God invites us into the fulfilment of that divine purpose in the world. Thus, when people pray, things happen (or get prevented).

Normally the way prayer goes on in the church bears no relation to what the Bible has to say about the subject, like most other things that go on in the church.

Five amazing things you can tell God not to do:

\* Don’t lose your temper

\* Don’t give up with the job half-done

\* Don’t give people the excuse to misjudge you

\* Don’t be inflexible

\* Don’t forget your promises.

Or to express these five daring exhortations as positives:

\* Be patient with us

\* Be persistent with us

\* Be aware of what people think

\* Be prepared to change your mind

\* Be mindful of your promises.

# (g) Jubilee 2000 (Leviticus 25)

Here’s really worthwhile way of marking a new millennium, though we need to get to work at it now. Let’s get Western banks to cancel the Third World’s debts. That’s the aim of the “Jubilee 2000” movement.

Some facts.

In the 1970s the banks lent money to the Third World because they were awash with it, then put up interest rates at just the time as changes in the world economy meant that Third World countries had even less resources to pay the loans back. So now they have had to gear their economies just to paying the interest on these loans. So

\* Mexico has had to stop producing enough maize for its own people to eat, so that it can grow strawberries to sell to people like us.

\* Africa as a whole now spends four times as much paying the interest on debts to us as it does on healthcare.

\* In sub‑Saharan Africa the percentage of children enrolled in grade school fell by 20% over a decade.

• In Costa Rica wages have fallen by a third since 1980.

• Each year, the Third World pays the West three times more in debt repayments than it receives in aid.

\*.Each person in the Third World owes the equivalent of $420 to Western nations and Western banks, much more than their annual income for many of them.

\* People like us are twice as much better off than the poorest parts of the world than we were in 1960.

Jubilee in Leviticus 25

After the fall of Jerusalem, people sought God’s vision for the kind of community they really ought to be, sought to imagine what Moses would envision if he were here now. They recognized that inequalities will develop in a community: every 50 years everything should go back to square one. Their vision suggested a number of principles:

\* Let the land have a rest now and again, because it’s God’s.

\* Be honest with one another, out of reverence for God.

\* Trust God rather than worry whether you can afford to honor God.

\* Use your resources to support people who fall on hard times, because we all belong to one family.

\* Don’t take advantage when other people in the community are in difficulties and turn them into cheap labor, because they are God’s servants.

In Leviticus that didn’t apply to foreigners, but now that there is "neither Jew nor Greek", it should apply to everyone. The whole world is my neighbor in my global village.

In the eighteenth century, Thomas Jefferson told Britain that all men were equal. In the nineteenth century, black Americans told white Americans that this also applied to them. In the twentieth century, women told men that it applied to them, too. In 1998 it is time for Christians to help the world see that it applies to Africans and Latinos and Asians in Africa and Latin America and Asia as well as in the West.

What Should We Do?

Don’t pray ‑ it will be too dangerous, because biblical prayer in this situation is prayer for God’s judgment.

\* Be better informed: e.g. via serious tv news, newspapers, or journals, and talking to Third World students.

\* Imagine your income cut by 25%: how would you change what you spend on home/cars/schools?

\* Resolve to implement some of that next time you move (or even now). Model what a more realistic life would look like.

\* Think of ways of educating your church in these issues, so that the church becomes a model for the world.

\* Get your church to stir so that these issues get on the political agenda.

"If any of your kin fall into difficulty ... they and their children shall go free in the jubilee year.... They are my servants".

# (h) You Shall Not Covet (Deuteronomy 5:21)

“You shall not covet.” The three weeks that have just passed have highlighted the possibility that the last of the Torah’s ten basic commands is a particularly important one in our culture. Over recent decades, coveting has become the underlying principle of life in the U.S.A. It is of course easy to see this in the persons of the executives who take away millions of dollars in salaries and bonuses. It adds insult to injury that they do this as the people who got us into this mess, but even before we knew that they were doing this, our hackles rose at the ever-increasing disparity between their incomes and those of ordinary people and poor people.

But the rest of us can hardly afford to sit in judgment on those executives, because they are only doing more efficiently what the rest of us do in our small ways. They wanted more money, and they found a legal way to get it. We want more money, and if we can find a legal way, we will get it.

Two or three years ago, when the house prices boom was at its height, every time one of the units in our condo sold, people were asking keenly, “What did it sell for?” Every time the price went up it was good news for everyone else – it meant that my unit was worth more.

House prices weren’t the only index of our covetousness. The average U.S. household has $8,500 of credit card debt. That’s how far they are living beyond their means. Now many of these households are in that position because they have hit a crisis – maybe someone has got ill and they have had healthcare costs that weren’t covered. But many are in that position because they kept seeing those adverts for plasma TVs and it seemed stupid not to get one, after all when TV goes digital in a few months the old TV won’t work, right? We give into covetousness. We are all living beyond our means.

And the position we get into individually is the position we are in as a nation. As a nation we live beyond our means, and we keep going only because the rest of the world lends us its money, and because we are passing on our debts to the next generation.

Our life is based on wanting and on borrowing in order to fulfill our wants. If you are a person who can live within your means and you are putting something aside for your retirement, then you probably don’t keep that in dollar bills under your bed. You put it in the bank or in some investment, so that it increases in value. So you become not one of the people who borrow to get what you want; you are a person who lends to get what you want. Borrowers and lenders, all functioning on the basis of coveting. We needed a bailout of troubled financial institutions because without that, lending and borrowing would cease, and this would be the death of the economy, it would mean recession. The survival of the country depends on people lending and borrowing money.

Now in itself the idea that the survival of the country and the state and the city and the family depends on lending and borrowing is not something to be concerned about. Lending and borrowing are key features of Israel’s life, and Jesus urges people to lend to anyone who wants to borrow from them. Because when situations were tough, when the harvest failed or enemies ruined your crops, you needed to borrow in order to survive, to get back on your feet. And the way the community worked was by people whose harvest hadn’t failed or whose crops hadn’t been ruined – they lent resources to people who were in a tough situation. The survival of the community depended on lending and borrowing, like ours does. But the difference was that nobody made money out of this, because you weren’t allowed to charge interest on loans. Now no doubt in practice people found ways around that ban, but that doesn’t alter the significance of the principle. You borrowed money because you needed it. I don’t mean you needed it because you needed a plasma TV but you needed it in order to have food to eat. And you lent money because this other person needed it and not because you wanted to make money.

But that attitude would be possible only if people took that tenth commandment seriously. When credit cards first arrived in Britain, one of them devised a brilliant advertising slogan. Their credit card “takes the waiting out of wanting.” We have now made the foundation of our economic life the assumption it encouraged, that wanting is to be affirmed, and that borrowing is the way to fulfill it.

The assumption in the scriptures is that wanting is to be disaffirmed, and that lending is the way you show love.

What’s so wrong with wanting? There’s nothing wrong with wanting in itself. The first time this word comes in the Bible is when God makes all the trees in the garden of Eden, with the lovely fruit that is the kind of thing that human beings will want, will fancy. Nothing wrong with that. But the commandment refers to wanting something that belongs to someone else – someone else’s house or their spouse or their servants or their animals.

There’s nothing wrong with wanting an apricot off the tree in your garden. But wanting something that belongs to someone else is the first step to trying to defraud them of it. I think that links with the fact that coveting comes after all those commands about outward acts. What lies behind stealing and perjury and adultery and never having a day off? Coveting. And in different ways it can lie behind serving other gods and murder and so on, too. The gospel for today reflects that in Jesus’ parable about the tenants committing murder in order to steal someone’s inheritance. Coveting skews and screws up your attitude to everything, and to everyone. Instead of wanting to live in generous love in relation to them, we want to get hold of their stuff.

And it skews and screws up your attitude to God. The second time this word comes in the Bible is when Eve looks at the one tree that God had told them not to take the fruit of, and she spotted that it was to be desired to make a person wise. Nothing wrong with wanting to be wise. But God’s command in the garden had told Adam, “Don’t take the fruit of that tree.” And Eve let her desire overrule that word from God.

There’s something paradoxical here. There are two contexts when you may be tempted to covet. One is when you haven’t got much. The other is when you have got lots. I mean, you can’t blame people who haven’t got much for wanting the wherewithal to live. But if anything, coveting becomes more of a problem the more you have. And it’s not so surprising because the things that we covet, that we borrow to buy, can never satisfy us. It’s lovely looking at that plasma TV for a week and then you take it for granted. I know. I have bought one. But it can’t satisfy. Adam and Eve had got nearly everything, but they wanted the one thing they had been told to keep off from. And the result was that their wanting, their coveting, skewed and screwed up their relationship with God. Or rather, it indicated that their relationship with God was already screwed up. Otherwise they would just have been laughing at the serpent. “You want us to take no notice of God when God has given us so much? You have to be joking.”

In the psalm we just read, that word for covet or desire came again. God’s words, God’s commands, are “more to be desired… than gold, more than much fine gold” (Ps 19:10). The translation used the word “desire” but it’s the same word that is translated “covet” in the commandment. God’s commands are to be coveted more than anything. You see, there is nothing wrong with coveting, with desiring. The question is, what are you desiring. Here’s Paul’s testimony in the epistle for today: “Whatever gains I had, I have come to regard as loss… because of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord.” It’s all rubbish, he says, and he uses a really rude word to describe it. It’s all crap. It’s the only time this word comes in the Bible. I’ve seen through the uselessness , the emptiness, the worthlessness, of all that stuff. I’m still coveting, Paul says, in effect, but I’m coveting Christ. I want to know Christ.

In the past, the church in the U.S.A. has been able to reckon that this was in some sense a Christian country and that the church could identify with it and with our culture. At some point in the last fifty years, I don’t know exactly when, but at some point, we reached a tipping point when that was no longer possible. We are certainly well beyond it now. The church has to stand over against the culture, not to affirm it. We have to model a different way of being. And declining to be a people defined by coveting is one of the ways in which we must do that.

This week, go away and covet. Face the worthlessness of the things the TV keeps telling you to covet, and covet Christ.

# (i) Remembering (Deuteronomy 7:6-11)

(Orginally a farewell sermon preached in different versions at my seminary and my church in England in June/August 1997, then included in *To The Usual Suspects* (Carlisle, UK: Paternoster, 1998).

When Moses is about to give up the leadership of Israel, as the Old Testament tells the story, he preaches one last sermon. He has led them for a generation and they are now to pass on to a new stage of their life, and God has made it clear that this new stage and this seeing the fulfilment of God’s vision is to happen under a different leader. He can look on into the land where God’s vision is taking them, he knows what it looks like, but he will not walk in it with them. He is about to undertake a new journey of his own, the first time for the best part of his grown-up life that he will be journeying with God apart from them, and the mountain he is about to climb has some surprises in store for him.

So on the eve of his climbing his mountain, he preaches a sermon. It is a long one, this book Deuteronomy. I calculate that the actual sermon is about 25,000 words, which would take four hours to preach non-stop. When you preach your last sermon in circumstances like Moses’s, what do you say? What did the Deuteronomists (the anonymous religious visionaries who ghosted this sermon some centuries later, on the usual critical view) think Moses would have wanted people to remember? From all those words I take four motifs from 7:6-11.

First, remember that you are a holy people. In the Old Testament the word “holy” does not mean righteous and moral. It means special to God, different, awe-inspiring. You are a special, different, awe-inspiring people, says Moses. It is a position which belongs to Israel, and then which the church comes to share in, without replacing Israel. “You are a people holy to Yahweh your God”.

Being holy meant having nothing to do with the way the Canaanites were. After all, “Yahweh your God chose you out of all nations on earth to be his special possession”. They resembled the rooms in Buckingham Palace which you do not see when you go on the tour, the rooms which belong especially to the Queen. The Israelites had that specialness to Yahweh. They were to be different.

Israel never took any notice of this expectation, and we do not want to be different either. Forty years ago Christians were different: we did not go to the pub or the cinema or go dancing, for instance, or if we did, we knew we were breaking taboos. Now we are all indistinguishable from the world, and it is not obviously a step forward. Yet I do not really want Christians to start looking different in that kind of way.

So how should we be different? What is holiness? When you think about it, to call human beings holy is a kind of contradiction in terms. “Holy” is by definition what makes God and what distinguishes God from us. So what sense does it make to call us holy?

I wonder whether for us being holy means being supernaturally human. It means being human, but in a special way that is redolent of God, that is special, that is supernatural.

The way Ann and I have to be holy is by coping with Ann’s illness. The way anyone else has to be holy will be different. But as I think of the Christians whom I know best, I think of them being human, but of there being something special, something supernatural about them in their humanness.

There is a British television programme called “How do they do that”? That is what I think of many of my Christian friends. How does he do that? How does she manage to be that kind of person? It is probably something they are unconscious of, or take for granted, but for other people it is what makes them special, what makes them holy.

I do not think much about the heroics of coping with a wife who is disabled, and I am always a bit astonished when someone else comments on the patience it needs or on some other aspects of how Ann and I handle Ann’s illness. I know that people find it is something through which God gets access to them, in some mysterious way. And that is true of aspects of who other people are, too. It is as we let the people we are be the people we are with God, that the supernatural appears through the human and the world has the opportunity to see that there is something different about us. That is something I would want to leave with people if I were going, like Moses.

But Moses is talking corporately. It is as the people of God that he reminds them they are holy. I want to encourage belief in the church as God’s holy people.

Each summer our seminary in England has a day to which we invite the vicars who are receiving curates from us, so that they can see something of the training from which their curates are coming. One year I was appalled at the paternalism that emerged in the way some of the vicars spoke of their congregations. It was important that the vicar and the curate decided on their line about policy issues before the church council discussed them, otherwise it would be confusing for the people, would it not?

Who do they think are the holy people of God? The clergy are simply some paid functionaries whose position puts them in greater spiritual danger than anyone else in the church. It is the church that is in holy orders, by virtue of our baptism. To put it in Deuteronomy’s terms, the declaration that God chose Israel comes before any talk of God’s choosing the king. The people were familiar with the idea that God chose David. The Deuteronomists dared to preface it with the declaration that the choice of David, like the choice of the priesthood, was subordinate to the choosing of the whole people.

And Moses is inviting his hearers to believe in the holiness of the actual Israel, the visible church if you like, the actual church which exists, the Church of England and the Methodist Connexion and the Baptist Union and the Korean Presbyterian Church and the Church of God (Cleveland, Tennessee) and the Coptic Orthodox Church. It is always tempting to re-define the church to mean the group we belong to, the bit of the church that we think is really alive. It is tempting to be cynical about the church which actually exists, as comes out in our jokes. When Moses says “you are a holy people”, he is talking about the Israel which actually exists. It is the visible church that is holy, and therefore is not to be dismissed or despaired of. Remember that you are a holy people.

Second, remember that you are loved. I reckon it is better, if you have the choice, to fall in love with one of your friends than to try to make a friend of your lover. Moses here implies that this was what God did. He uses two words for love. “It was not because you were more numerous than any other nation that Yahweh cared for you and chose you”. “Cared for you”. “Set his affection on you”, the NIV has. “How did Yahweh come to have those feelings for you, come to be attached to you?”, asks Moses: it is a word that can describe people’s sexual feelings for each other. “Well it was not because there were so many of you”, he answers. This is just as well. When the Deuteronomists were writing this sermon, Israel’s heyday lay in the past, and it would be as well if the reason Yahweh was attached to them was not that there were so many of them, and this is as well for us, too.

Perhaps it is the ecclesiological equivalent of “Will you still need me, will you still feed me, when I’m 64?”. “When my hair is gone and I can’t stay up as late as I once did, when I’ve gone pear-shaped and cellulite, will you still love me?” “It was not things about how you looked that made me love you in the first place, fathead.” “So why did you love me?”

At this point if you’ve got Nora Ephron as your scriptwriter you say as Harry did to Sally, “I love that you get cold when it is 71 degrees out. I love that it takes you an hour and a half to order a sandwich. I love that you get a little crinkle above your nose when you’re looking at me as though I’m nuts. I love that when I’ve been with you all day I can still smell your perfume on my clothes. And I love that you are the last person I want to talk to before I go to sleep at night”. If you have Hosea as your scriptwriter, it is the same. You say things like “When I found Israel, it was like finding grapes in the desert”.

But if you are just an ordinary prosaic British person, when you get asked “So why do you love me?” you get lost for words and perhaps you simply say “I just did, and I still do”. So it is when the Deuteronomists are writing Yahweh’s script. Moses moves to the other word for love, the all-purpose Hebrew word which can still mean affection and passion but can also suggest friendship and commitment. “I did not get attached to you because there were so many of you. It was just because I loved you. I had found myself committed to you and I could not get out of it. It had become part of me. I had to do what I’d told Abraham and Sarah I would do.”

Remember you are loved: that God is attached to you and committed to you, for reason to do with you maybe, but certainly for reasons to do with God. No matter what seems to happen to the church, God loves it and will continue to be committed to it. It means God has not finished with it. God will fulfil the promises made to it.

Third, remember that you are called to knowledge. As I come to the end of ten years as principal of an Anglican theological college, I have from time to time wondered what it has been about. When I had just been appointed principal, there was an informal chapel occasion which ended up with the faculty who were present coming to the front and someone praying for us and giving each of us a word from God, and mine was that I had had a vision for college and I had not thought it would be fulfilled, but that it would be fulfilled.

At the time I thought it referred to college being more relaxed about charismatic gifts, and more open, and that has happened, but I have come to realize something else. Sometimes you only know what a prophecy meant when it has been fulfilled, and over the past two or three years I think we have seen a quantum leap in our integration of theology and prayer and life, and that was always my subconscious vision, but I did not have much hope that these could ever come together and I did not even articulate that vision, but God had it and shared it and it has come about. I believed that people were called to knowledge.

“Know then that Yahweh your God is God”, says Moses, and adds some further theological facts about Yahweh that the people are to know. It sounds like the essence of doing theology, and it is. But the NRSV rightly translates it as “acknowledging” these facts about Yahweh, not just knowing them. It assumes that theology and commitment are one thing, not two things. That is something Moses wants to leave with people when he goes. When theological students are in the classroom they are not playing academic games. They are worshipping. And when they are in chapel, they are not playing religious games. They are knowing.

What are those facts about God? For Moses the key one is that God is faithful, someone who keeps covenant and commitment. “Know then that Yahweh your God is God, the faithful God”.

I am glad about that because I feel in special need of it. I am leaving because God made it clear that the moment had come. We are going where we are going not so much because God guided as because God pushed and manipulated. People ask me from time to time if I am excited about it, and the answer is “Not especially”. It is just the direction God has pushed us. People say it is courageous; it would have required more courage to stay here. But all sorts of things could go wrong. There was a time when we had sent our belongings off but had not actually completed purchase on the apartment we had sent them to, nor had we got a mortgage, and a mail package about this had gone astray in the post, nor had we got a visa, and the embassy phone lines were permanently busy. Just before we left we heard that our belongings were not going to be there before us, as we had planned, and I am not sure how we will work around that. I expect it will be OK; but there are other more personal things that could go wrong, and I have to trust that it is true that God is faithful.

Moses offers us various encouragements. He reminds us that Yahweh has been faithful in the past, keeping that promise to Abraham and Sarah. He reminds us that Yahweh bothered to exercise such power and bothered to deliver us into the freedom which we do enjoy even when we are not actually in a promised land, so surely the wilderness will not be the end. He reminds us that there is a vast disparity between God’s responsiveness to lovers and to haters. Punishment for the haters, yes; but faithfulness to 1000 generations for the lovers. One generation will do, thank you. For us I am at least as encouraged by the signs that it is indeed God who is doing the pushing and manipulating, so that if we end up in a mess and I feel as I sometimes do that God could have made my life a bit easier than other people’s life looks, well at least I will know that I am in this hole with God. We have to remember that we are called to knowledge, and knowledge of the God who is faithful.

Fourth, remember that you are called to follow God’s word. What Moses says more specifically is, “You are to observe these commandments, statutes, and laws which I give you this day, and keep them.” I do not actually like that. I do not see why God is so keen on giving commandments. I am not very keen on giving commands - why is God? I do not want people to obey me - why does God? I cannot believe that if I were God I would be so keen on issuing orders. It seems such an odd thing to enjoy, even if you do know best.

So at the moment this is an angle on scripture that I am trying to wrestle with. Other people will have other questions about scripture. If there are no aspects of scripture that they do not like and do not have to wrestle with, then they are kidding themselves. It means that they have bracketed them out or reinterpreted them. That is what as evangelicals we have to do. We know we have to accept all of scripture, so we make it mean something else so we can accept it. As a Bible teacher one of my basic concerns has become simply to get people to read the Bible with open eyes. Some people learn to, others do not. I want people to read the Bible, to be open to finding there things that they had not realized were there, to be enthralled and dazzled and appalled and infuriated and puzzled and worried and stimulated and kept awake at night by these extraordinary words from God, to let their mind and heart and imagination and will be provoked and astonished by them. I want them to “observe them ... and keep them”.

If Moses and Israel will commit themselves to that, together and apart, they can cross their river, and he can climb his mountain.