

The Exodus- Ten Commandments

The Book of Exodus begins more than four hundred years after Joseph, his brothers, and the Pharaoh he once served have all died. The new leadership in Egypt—feeling threatened by Jacob’s descendants, who have increased greatly in size—embarks on a campaign to subdue the Israelites, forcing them into slavery and eventually decreeing that all Hebrew boys must be killed at birth in the Nile River. The Hebrew women resist the decree, and one woman opts to save her newborn son by setting him afloat on the river in a papyrus basket. Fortunately, Pharaoh’s daughter discovers the abandoned child and raises him after he has been nursed, naming him Moses.

Moses is aware of his Hebrew roots, and, one day, he kills an Egyptian who is beating an Israelite worker. Moses flees in fear to Midian, a town near Sinai, where he meets a priest named Jethro and marries the man’s daughter, beginning a new life as a shepherd. God, however, is concerned for the suffering of the Israelites, and he appears to Moses in the form of a burning bush. God speaks to Moses, informing him of his plan to return the Israelites to Canaan—to “a land flowing with milk and honey” (3:8)—and to send Moses back to Egypt to accomplish this task. Moses is timid and resists, citing his lack of eloquence and abilities, and refuses to go. God is angered but encourages Moses, presenting him with a staff for performing miracles and instructing Moses to take his brother, Aaron, with him as an aid. When Moses asks God what his name is, God replies, “I AM WHO I AM” (3:14).

Moses and Aaron return to Egypt, where Moses organizes the Israelites and confronts the Pharaoh, demanding the release of the Hebrew people. Moses performs a miracle, turning his staff into a snake, but Pharaoh is unimpressed and only increases the workload for the Israelites. God responds by inflicting a series of ten plagues on Egypt. God turns the Nile River into blood, causes frogs to cover Egypt, turns all of the dust in Egypt to gnats, and causes swarms of flies to come into the houses of Pharaoh and his officials. God then strikes Egypt’s livestock with a disease, creates festering boils on humans and animals, and sends thunder, hail, and fire that destroy crops, livestock, and people. God sends swarms of locusts, and covers Egypt with “a darkness that can be felt” (10:21). Before each plague, Moses demands the Israelites’ release, and after each plague, God purposefully “hardens” Pharaoh so that he refuses the request (4:21, 7:22). The tenth and final plague kills all the firstborn males in Egypt. Before the plague, Moses instructs the Hebrew people to cover their door posts in the blood of a sacrificed lamb as a sign for God to protect their homes from his killings. Pharaoh relents and releases the more than 600,000 Israelites who, in turn, plunder the Egyptians’ wealth. Upon leaving, Moses enjoins the

Israelites to commemorate this day forever by dedicating their firstborn children to God and by celebrating the festival of Passover, named for God's protection from the final plague (12:14–43).

Guided by a pillar of cloud during the day and by fire during the night, Moses and the Israelites head west toward the sea. Pharaoh chases them. The Israelites complain that Moses has taken them to die in the wilderness, and Moses, at God's bidding, parts the sea for the people to cross. Pharaoh follows and Moses closes the waters back again, drowning the Egyptian army. Witnessing the miracle, the people decide to trust Moses, and they sing a song extolling God as a great but loving warrior. Their optimism is brief, and the people soon begin to worry about the shortage of food and water. God responds by sending the people food from heaven, providing a daily supply of quail and a sweet bread-like substance called manna. The people are required only to obey God's commandments to enjoy this food. Soon thereafter, the Israelites confront the warring Amalekite people, and God gives the Israelites the power to defeat them. During battle, whenever Moses raises his arms, the Israelites are able to rout their opponents.

Three months after the flight from Egypt, Moses and the Israelites arrive at Mount Sinai, where God appears before them, descending on the mountain in a cloud of thunder and lightning. Moses climbs the mountain, and God gives Moses two stone tablets with ten commandments inscribed on them regarding general, ethical behavior as well as an extended series of laws regarding worship, sacrifices, social justice, and personal property. God explains to Moses that if the people will obey these regulations, he will keep his covenant with Israel and will go with them to retrieve from the Canaanites the land promised to Abraham. Moses descends from the mountain and relates God's commandments to the people. The people agree to obey, and Moses sprinkles the people with blood as a sign of the covenant. Moses ascends to the mountain again where God gives him more instructions, this time specifying in great detail how to build a portable temple called an ark in which God's presence will dwell among the Israelites. God also emphasizes the importance of observing the Sabbath day of holy rest.

Moses comes down from the mountain after forty days, only to find that Aaron and the Israelites have now erected an idol—a golden calf that they are worshipping in revelry, in direct defiance of the ten commandments. Moses breaks the stone tablets on which God has inscribed the new laws, and God plans to destroy the people. Moses intercedes on the Israelites' behalf, begging God to relent and to remember his covenant. Pleased with Moses, God is appeased and continues to meet with Moses face to face, “as one speaks to a

friend,” in a special tent set aside for worship (33:11). God reaffirms his covenant with Moses, and, fashioning new stone tablets to record his decrees, God declares himself to be a compassionate, loving, and patient God. At Moses’s direction, the Israelites renew their commitment to the covenant by erecting a tabernacle to God according to the exact specifications God has outlined.

Analysis

While Genesis explains the origins of the world and of humanity, Exodus is the theological foundation of the Bible. Exodus explains the origins of Torah—the law of the Jewish people and the tradition surrounding that law. Torah is not merely a list of laws, but, rather, the notion of law as a way of life. Indeed, the law exists as a way of life for Moses and his people. Although portions of Exodus are devoted to legal matters, the declaration of law in Exodus always comes in the form of a story, relayed by discussions between God and Moses, and between Moses and the people.

These laws and tradition are filled with symbols of God’s promise to the Israelites. In Genesis, God uses symbols such as the rainbow and gives people new names, like Abraham, as signs of his covenant. Such personalized signs are useful when communicating a promise to a single person or family. In Exodus, however, God attempts to communicate his promise to an entire nation of people. Social laws about how the Israelites should treat their slaves and annual festivals such as Passover are signs that a community of people can easily recognize and share. In this sense, obedience to God’s laws is less a means of achieving a level of goodness than it is a way for the people to denote their commitment to God’s covenant.

The Hebrew word for “Exodus” originally means “names,” and Exodus is often called the Book of Names. The book discusses the different names God takes and the various ways God manifests himself to the Israelites. When God tells Moses that his name is “I AM” (3:14), God defines himself as a verb (in Hebrew, *ahyeh*) rather than a noun. This cryptic statement suggests that God is a being who is not subject to the limits of people’s expectations or definitions. Most often, however, God reveals himself to the people through theophany: extraordinary natural phenomena that signal God’s arrival or presence. Theophanic events in Exodus include the pillars of cloud and fire, the thunder at Mount Sinai, and the miraculous daily supply of manna. Such spectacles demonstrate God’s attempts to prove his existence to a nation of doubting people from whom he has been decidedly absent for more than four hundred years. The unwillingness of the people to accept God’s existence is never more apparent than when the Israelites worship a golden calf in the shadow of the

thunderous Mount Sinai. As a result, God's final manifestation of himself is the tabernacle—specifically, the Ark of the Covenant, a golden vessel in which God's presence, or spirit, will reside. Like the law, the Ark is an effective symbol of God, for it is an object that the people not only build as a community according to God's specifications but also as a religious vessel that can be picked up and carried wherever Israel goes.

Moses is the first true hero we encounter in the Hebrew Bible. He manifests all the traits of a traditional hero. He overcomes timidity and inner strife. He challenges Pharaoh, leading Israel to great feats. And he wields his own weapon, the miraculous staff. These elements give Moses traditional heroic status, but Moses also presents us with a new type of hero—the religious priest. All of Moses's political and military dealings serve the one end of delivering the Israelites to God, physically moving them from Egypt to Mount Sinai and interceding to God for them when they disobey. As God declares early on, Moses is God's representative to the people, and Moses makes God's relationship with Israel a personal one. Instead of a series of incendiary explosions, Moses presents God's instructions to the people through conversation and conveys God's desire to destroy the Israelites by breaking the stone tablets in front of them. Most importantly, Moses's dialogue with God enables the author to portray God in softer, human terms—as someone who listens, grieves, and is actually capable of changing his mind.

Character List

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God

The creator of the world and an all-powerful being. God calls himself the only true deity worthy of human worship. As the figurehead of Israel and the force behind every event, God acts as the unseen hero of the Old Testament. God reveals his intentions by speaking to people. Physical manifestations of God are always indirect or symbolic. God appears in many different forms, including an angel, a wrestler, a burst of fire, and a quie

Abraham

The patriarch of the Hebrew people. Abraham is traditionally called “Father Abraham” because the Israelite people and their religion descend from him. God establishes his covenant, or promise, with Abraham, and God develops an ongoing relationship with the Israelites through Abraham's descendants. Abraham practices the monotheistic worship of God, and his resilient faith in God, despite many challenges, sets the pattern for the Israelite religion's view of righteousness.

Moses

The reluctant savior of Israel in its exodus from Egyptian bondage to the promised land. Moses mediates between God and the people, transforming the Israelites from an oppressed ethnic group into a nation founded on religious laws. Moses's legendary miracles before Pharaoh, along with his doubts and insecurities, make him the great mortal hero of the Old Testament. He is the only man ever to know God "face to face." Four out of the five books of the Pentateuch are devoted to Moses and Israel's activities under his leadership.

David

The king of Israel and the founder of Jerusalem, or "Zion." David's reign marks the high point of Israel in the biblical narrative. Although David's claim to the throne is threatened by Saul and by David's own son, Absalom, David maintains his power by blending shrewd political maneuvering with a magnanimous and forgiving treatment of his enemies. David's decision to bring the Ark of the Covenant—Israel's symbol of God—to the capital of Jerusalem signals the long-awaited unification of the religious and political life of Israel in the promised land.

Jacob

The grandson of Abraham, Jacob is the third patriarch of the Israelite people and the father of the twelve sons who form the tribes of Israel. Jacob experiences a life fraught with deception, bewilderment, and change. He steals his brother Esau's inheritance right and wrestles with God on the banks of the Jabbok River. Appropriately, the nation that springs from Jacob's children derives its name from Jacob's God-given name, "Israel." "Israel" means "struggles with God," and Jacob's struggles are emblematic of the tumultuous story of the nation of Israel.

Joseph

Jacob's son and the head official for the Pharaoh of Egypt. Despite being sold into slavery by his brothers, Joseph rises to power in Egypt and saves his family from famine. Joseph's calm and gracious response to his brothers' betrayal introduces the pattern of forgiveness and redemption that characterizes the survival of the Israelite people throughout the Old Testament.

Saul

Israel's first king. After God chooses Saul to be king, Saul loses his divine right to rule Israel by committing two religious errors. Saul acts as a character foil to

David, because his plot to murder David only highlights David's mercy to Saul in return. Saul's inner turmoil over the inscrutability of God's exacting standards makes him a sympathetic but tragic figure.

Solomon

David's son and the third king of Israel. Solomon builds the opulent Temple in Jerusalem and ushers in Israel's greatest period of wealth and power. God grants Solomon immense powers of knowledge and discernment in response to Solomon's humble request for wisdom. Solomon's earthly success hinders his moral living, however, and his weakness for foreign women and their deities leads to Israel's downfall.

Elijah & Elisha

The prophets who oppose the worship of the god Baal in Israel. After the division of Israel into two kingdoms, Elijah and his successor, Elisha, represent the last great spiritual heroes before Israel's exile. Their campaign in northern Israel against King Ahab and Jezebel helps to lessen Israel's growing evil but does not restore Israel's greatness. Israel's demise makes Elijah and Elisha frustrated doomsayers and miracle workers rather than national leaders or saviors.

Adam & Eve

The first man and woman created by God. Adam and Eve introduce human evil into the world when they eat the fruit of a tree God has forbidden them to touch.

Noah

The survivor of God's great flood. Noah obediently builds the large ark, or boat, that saves the human race and the animal kingdom from destruction. Noah is the precursor to Abraham, because Noah represents the first instance of God's attempt to form a covenant with humanity through one person.

Isaac

Abraham's son and the second member in the triumvirate of Israel's patriarchs. Isaac's importance consists less in his actions than in the way he is acted upon by others. God tests Abraham by commanding him to kill his son Isaac, and Isaac's blindness and senility allow his own son Jacob to steal Isaac's blessing and the inheritance of God's covenant.

Aaron

Moses's brother, who assists Moses in leading the Israelites out of Egypt. God designates Aaron to be the first high priest in Israel. The quiet Aaron often stands between Moses and the people to soften Moses's angry response to their sinful behavior.

Joshua

The successor of Moses as Israel's leader. Joshua directs the people in their sweeping military campaign to conquer and settle the Promised Land. Joshua's persistent exhortations to Israel to remain obedient to God imply that he doubts Israel will do so. His exhortations foreshadow Israel's future religious struggles.

Samson

One of Israel's judges and an epic hero who thwarts the neighboring Philistines with his superhuman strength. Samson is rash, belligerent, and driven by lust for foreign women—qualities that contradict Jewish religious ideals. Samson's long hair is both the source of his strength and the symbol of his religious devotion to God as a Nazirite. Samson's character demonstrates that in the bible, heroic potential is gauged not by human excellence but by faith in God.

Samuel

The last of Israel's judges and the prophet who anoints both Saul and David as king. Samuel fulfills political and priestly duties for Israel, but he ushers in Israel's monarchy mainly as a prophet—one who pronounces God's words and decisions. Samuel's stoic and aloof position in Israel allows Saul to struggle with God and his fate on his own.

Absalom

David's son, who attempts to overthrow his father's throne. Absalom's violent rise to power suggests that the evil that corrupts Israel comes from within.

Joab

King David's loyal military commander. Joab serves as a foil to David's successful combination of religion and politics. Joab's reasonable desire to see justice and retribution delivered to the kingdom's traitors emphasizes the unusual quality of David's kindness to his enemies.

Rehoboam & Jeroboam

The opposing kings who divide Israel into the northern kingdom of Israel and the southern kingdom of Judah. Rehoboam and Jeroboam introduce rampant worship of idols and false gods into their kingdoms. Each king acts both as a

point of contrast and a double, or mirror, for the other, allowing the biblical reader to trace the rapid growth of evil in Israel's two kingdoms.

Ahab & Jezebel

The most wicked rulers of Israel. Ahab and Jezebel spread cult worship of the pagan god Baal throughout the northern kingdom. Dogs gather to eat their blood at their deaths, fulfilling Elijah's prophecy.

Esther

A timid Jewish girl who becomes the queen of Persia. Esther boldly and cunningly persuades the king of Persia to remove his edict calling for the death of the exiled Jews.

Job

The subject of God and Satan's cosmic experiment to measure human faithfulness to God in the midst of immense pain. Job scorns false contrition and the advice of his friends, preferring instead to question God's role in human suffering. He retains an open and inquisitive mind, remaining faithful in his refusal to curse God.

In the Old Testament, God is unique, sovereign, and unchanging. He differs from Greek gods, whose faults and quarrels cause events. His unchanging nature is hinted at by his names. In biblical Hebrew, God is called "YAHWEH," meaning "to be." This title is similar to the title God uses with Moses, "I AM WHO I AM." However, the God presented in Old Testament does contradict himself at times. In the course of two chapters in Exodus, God threatens to destroy the Israelites, relents, and then pronounces himself loving, forgiving, and slow to anger. God grants himself the power of self-description; he is whoever he says he is.

Each biblical writer gives God human characteristics. For example, God speaks. We do not know how his listeners recognize that it is he who is speaking or what he sounds like, but God certainly embraces the ability to articulate his intentions through the human convention of language. Also, God assumes human form. He appears as an angel, as a group of three men, and as a mysterious army commander. In a sense, God takes on human qualities like a costume that can also be taken off, since his specific appearances do not offer a complete picture of him. Still, these manifestations suggest that there is a fundamental humanity to the personality of the Hebrew God. God casually walks in the garden with Adam and Eve. He even physically wrestles Jacob and allows Jacob to beat him. These humble and endearing qualities of God contrast

his later appearances as a pillar of fire and a thunderous mountain. The more extreme manifestations are, like the human manifestations, only a part of God's character rather than his sole mode of existence.

God's initial interaction with humankind is unsolicited. Noah, Abraham, and Moses do not ask God to form a relationship with them. Even when God is unseen, his immense power over human fate lurks beneath the events of the Old Testament narrative. On the surface, the characters' experiences are filled with suspense. The characters submit to chance and have a desperate, irrational faith in God. When God speaks or appears, we realize he has been in control all along, and the fear or suspense seems unfounded, trite, or comical. Amidst the gravity of human events, God's willingness to cause momentous events in order to teach a lesson shows him to be a strangely playful character.

Moses

Moses

Moses is one of the few characters whose complete biography is described by the biblical narrative, and the early events of his life characterize him as a product of his circumstances. Born in Egypt, Moses is raised by Pharaoh's daughter, who takes pity on the abandoned Hebrew baby. After an impulsive murder, Moses flees west, where he begins a life as a shepherd and stumbles into God in the form of a burning bush. He reluctantly agrees to return to Egypt and demand the Israelites' release, but agrees to little more. Each event in the journey from Egypt to Mount Sinai, where God delivers his laws to the Israelites, propels Moses further into the roles of prophet, priest, ruler, and savior of Israel.

Moses' most heroic virtue is his steadfast obedience, and it might be said that a passive quality permeates each of his miracles. Ten plagues strike Egypt because Moses simply appears in Pharaoh's court to request the release of the Israelites. With the help of his rod, or divine staff, Moses parts the waters of the Red Sea merely by outstretching his arms. Later, the beleaguered Israelites defeat a mighty army when two men help Moses raise his hands for the duration of the battle. The image of a stationary man bringing about overwhelming physical feats is striking. Moses himself is far from passive or reticent, yet he represents a prototype of the biblical hero whose greatness lies not in self-assertion but in obedience to God.

Moses is a compelling figure because he possesses human faults. He is passionate and impulsive. Descending from Mount Sinai, Moses knows ahead of time that the people are worshipping a golden idol, because God has warned him of this fact. Upon seeing the people, Moses angrily breaks the stone tablets inscribed with God's laws. God seems to value this passionate quality in Moses, for Moses is an effective mediator between God and the Israelites. He prays with a sense of urgency, unafraid to ask God to refrain from divine retribution and willing to accept the blame for the people's actions. His earnest attention to the present situation and to God's demands earns Moses the opportunity to speak with God face to face. Yet his passion remains his weakness. God commands Moses to produce water from a rock by speaking to it, but, irritated with the people's complaints, Moses hits the rock with his staff. This act of negligence bars Moses from entering the very promised land to which he has guided the Israelites for almost half a century.

David

David

David is a strong but unassuming shepherd who becomes God's choice to replace Saul as king of Israel. He is humble yet self-possessed, readily dismissing human opinion. His humility becomes clear early in his youth, when he kills the giant Goliath with a sling stone, declining the opportunity to use Saul's royal armor. As king, his foremost quality is obedience to God. For example, when his wife expresses embarrassment at David's dancing while he marches into Jerusalem, he rebukes her, boasting that he will embarrass himself so long as it pleases God.

David's mercy to others displays his selflessness—a product of his strenuous commitment to ethical ideals. His sense of propriety is striking when he refrains from killing Saul while Saul has his back turned. David scorns the easy opportunity to attack because he feels it would be morally wrong to strike God's current anointed ruler. As king, David forgives the kingdom's traitors, and executes the traitors of his enemies. When his own rebellious son dies, David cries aloud in public, "O my son Absalom, my son, my son Absalom!" (2 Samuel 18:33). His weeping suggests the depth of a father's blind love for his son.

David's mercy may also be interpreted as a product of his political aspirations. David refuses to kill Saul because he senses that whatever standards he imposes against the current king may one day be used against himself as ruler. Moreover, seeds of revolt have already been planted in the northern tribes of

Israel by David's reign, and the kingdom's unity may be on shaky ground. King David shows mercy to his traitors, especially Absalom, because he wishes to quell emotions and court the graces of all his subjects. By this reading, David appears to be a pragmatist—one who acts not out of his or her ideals, but on the basis of what is practical or expedient. However, the Old Testament ultimately seems to suggest that David's religious ideals do not conflict with his pragmatism.

Themes

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Themes are the fundamental and often universal ideas explored in a literary work.

The Problem of Evil

The Old Testament both raises and attempts to answer the question of how God can be good and all-powerful yet allow evil to exist in the world. From Adam and Eve's first disobedient act in the garden, each biblical book affirms that human evil is the inevitable result of human disobedience, not of God's malice or neglect. The first chapters of Genesis depict God as disappointed or "grieved" by human wickedness, suggesting that the humans, rather than God, are responsible for human evil (Genesis 6:6). Later books, such as Judges and Kings, show God's repeated attempts to sway the Israelites from the effects of their evil. These stories emphasize the human capacity to reject God's help, implying that the responsibility for evil lies with humanity. Judges echoes with the ominous phrase, "The Israelites again did what was evil in the sight of the Lord . . ." (Judges 3:12).

The most troublesome challenge to God's goodness, however, is the existence of natural evil, which is the undeserved destruction and pain humans often experience. God repeatedly instructs the Israelites to destroy entire cities, killing men, women, and children in the process. The Book of Job directly questions God's implication in natural evil. God punishes Job harshly for no other reason than to prove to Satan that Job is religiously faithful. In the end, God declares to Job that God's powerful ways are beyond human understanding and should not be questioned. The book implies that God sometimes uses natural evil as a rhetorical device—as a means of displaying his power or of proving a point in a world already tainted by human corruption.

The Possibility of Redemption

God typically responds to human behavior with retributive justice, meaning that people get what they deserve. God punishes the evil and blesses the righteous.

The theme of mercy and redemption, which develops throughout the biblical stories, contrasts with this standard of retribution.

Redemption appears in two forms in the Old Testament. Sometimes, one person forgives another by simply forgetting or ignoring the other's offense. When Jacob returns to his homeland after cheating his brother, we expect hatred and vengeance from Esau. Instead, Esau welcomes Jacob with a joyful embrace, reversing Jacob's expectations no less than Jacob has already reversed Esau's fate. Similarly, King David treats his enemies with kindness and mercy, a policy that often seems shortsighted in its dismissal of traditional justice.

Another form of redemption involves the intervention of a third party as a mediator or sacrifice to quell God's anger with the wrongdoers. Moses's frantic prayers at Mount Sinai frequently cause God to "change his mind" and relent from destroying the Israelites (Exodus 32:14). In the Book of Judges, Samson sacrifices his life to redeem the Israelites from the Philistine oppression brought on by Israel's incessant evil. These human acts of redemption mirror God's promise in the religious laws to forgive the people's sins on the basis of ritual animal sacrifices and offerings.

The Virtue of Faith

In the Old Testament, faith is a resilient belief in the one true God and an unshakable obedience to his will. The models of biblical faith are not those who are supported by organized religion but those who choose to trust in God at the most unpopular times. Part of the virtue of true faith is the ability to believe in God when he remains unseen. The Israelites betray their complete lack of faith when they complain after God repeatedly shows himself and displays miracles during the exodus from Egypt.

Noah, Abraham, and Elijah represent the three main heroes of faith in The Old Testament. Each demonstrates his faith in God by performing seemingly irrational tasks after God has been absent from humankind for an extended period of time. God has not spoken to humans for many generations when Noah obediently builds a large, strange boat in preparation for a monumental flood. Abraham similarly dismisses the idols and gods of his region in favor of a belief that an unseen and unnamed deity will provide a promised land for his descendants. Centuries later, the prophet Elijah attempts to rejuvenate faith in God after Israel has worshipped idols for decades. Like Noah and Abraham, Elijah develops a faith based on his ability to communicate directly with God.

Motifs

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Motifs are recurring structures, contrasts, and literary devices that can help to develop and inform the text's major themes.

The Covenant

God's covenant with humankind incorporates both his promise to grant Abraham and Abraham's descendants a promised land and the religious laws given to the Israelites. The covenant resembles ancient legal codes and treaties in which a lord or landowner specifies the conditions of a vassal's service and vows to protect the vassal in return. The biblical covenant, however, represents not just a contractual agreement but also a passionate, tumultuous relationship between God and humanity. God's covenant passes to Abraham's descendants, unifying the lives of seemingly disparate people within a developing story. The biblical writers suggest that this story is not theirs but God's—a means for God to show his purposes and his values to humankind by relating to one family.

The covenant is a unifying structure that allows the human characters to evaluate their lives as a series of symbolic experiences. At first, the signs of the covenant are physical and external. God relates to Abraham by commanding Abraham to perform the rite of circumcision and to kill his son, Isaac. In Exodus, God shows his commitment to the Israelites by miraculously separating the waters of the Red Sea and appearing in a pillar of fire. The religious laws are also symbols of the covenant. They represent customs and behavioral rules that unite the lives of the Israelites in a religious community devoted to God. Moses suggests that these laws are to become sacred words that the Israelites cherish in their hearts and minds (Deuteronomy 11:18). The covenant thus shapes the personal memories and the collective identity of the Israelites.

Doubles and Opposites

At the beginning of Genesis, God creates the world by dividing it into a system of doubles—the sun and the moon, light and dark, the land and the sea, and male and female. When Adam and Eve eat the forbidden fruit, and when Cain kills his brother Abel, good and evil enter the world. From this point on, the Old Testament writers describe the world as a place of binary opposites, or sets of two basic opposing forces. These forces include positive and negative, good and bad, and lesser and greater. These distinctions characterize the ethics of the Israelites. The laws in Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy outline the criteria for being ceremonially clean or unclean, and for choosing obedience over disobedience.

Biblical writers frequently challenge these distinctions. As twins with opposing traits, Jacob and Esau represent ideal character doubles. When Jacob steals

Esau's inheritance right, the younger son triumphs over the older son by dishonest, rather than honest, means. The reversal of fortune portrays God's covenant with humankind as a preference for the unexpected over the conventional, as well as God's willingness to accomplish his ends by imperfect means. The epic of Samson similarly blurs the line between weakness and strength. Samson, the icon of human strength, conquers the Philistines only after they bring him to his weakest by shaving his head and blinding him. Such stories question the human ability to tell the difference between good and bad.

Geography

The geography of the Old Testament determines the moral and religious well-being of the Hebrew people. The biblical authors circumscribe the spiritual story of Abraham and his descendants within a physical journey to and from the promised land. In a sense, the flow of the narrative can be summarized as a constant yearning for the promised land.

Displaced in Egypt, the Israelites grow in number without a religion or national identity. The journey with Moses to the promised land defines Israel's religion, laws, and customs. In Joshua, Judges, and the first book of Samuel, Israel's struggle to secure its borders mirrors its struggle to enjoy national unity and religious purity. David and Solomon's kingdoms represent the height of Israel, for Israel establishes a religious center in Jerusalem and begins to expand its territory. The division of the nation into northern and southern kingdoms represents the fragmentation of the promised land and, by implication, of God's promise to Israel. The ultimate exile into Assyria and Babylon denotes Israel's religious estrangement from God.

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The geography of the Old Testament determines the moral and religious well-being of the Hebrew people. The biblical authors circumscribe the spiritual

story of Abraham and his descendants within a physical journey to and from the promised land. In a sense, the flow of the narrative can be summarized as a constant yearning for the promised land.

Displaced in Egypt, the Israelites grow in number without a religion or national identity. The journey with Moses to the promised land defines Israel's religion, laws, and customs. In Joshua, Judges, and the first book of Samuel, Israel's struggle to secure its borders mirrors its struggle to enjoy national unity and religious purity. David and Solomon's kingdoms represent the height of Israel, for Israel establishes a religious center in Jerusalem and begins to expand its territory. The division of the nation into northern and southern kingdoms represents the fragmentation of the promised land and, by implication, of God's promise to Israel. The ultimate exile into Assyria and Babylon denotes Israel's religious estrangement from God.

Sample A+ Essay: Are Genesis & Exodus Consistent about Human Morality?

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The early books of Hebrew scripture, Genesis and Exodus in particular, tell the story of the Israelite people's evolution from a single individual to a large nation. As part of this story, these books also show how the Israelites' perception of morality shifts over time. Though the basic tenets do not change, the increasingly complex society the Israelites live in requires a correspondingly intricate set of codes and regulations. Morality therefore evolves from a simple recognition that notions of right and wrong are necessary into an elaborate system of rules and duties, one that requires individuals to recognize that they have duties to God, to one another, and to themselves.

The problem of good and evil is present from the outset of Hebrew scripture. In the Book of Genesis, the deity Yahweh forbids Adam and Eve from approaching the Tree of Knowing Good and Evil. Yahweh wants Adam and Eve to remain ignorant of the difference between good and evil because it is that ignorance that maintains the boundary between gods and humans. If Adam and Eve eat from that tree, Yahweh says, they will "become like one of us." Adam and Eve do eat from the tree, of course, and Yahweh expels them from the paradise of his garden, though not without first making clothes for them from animal skins. This story suggests, then, that humans are different from all other animals because they recognize the importance of morality. Having a conception of right and wrong is a great achievement, but it also comes with a terrible cost, since life is made difficult precisely because we believe that there are good actions we should be undertaking. Life would be easier, perhaps even

blissful, if we lacked morality, but we would be little better than animals without it.

Later in Genesis, however, the human accomplishment of morality loses some of its luster as it becomes clear that people are frequently unable to live up to their moral standards. Humans become so wicked, in fact, that Yahweh floods the Earth to rid it of his vile creations, saving only Noah and his family. After doing so, Yahweh announces that he will never do so again, since “the inclination of the human heart is evil.” Yahweh realizes that it is unjust to punish humanity collectively, since he created people with a natural tendency to act badly. Thus Genesis reveals that while morality is a fundamental human characteristic, it is extremely difficult to live a moral life since our instincts run counter to what we believe we ought to do.

The Book of Genesis, however, is very vague about what specific actions our morality should consist of, stipulating only that Adam and Eve should not eat from the tree, that no one should commit murder, and that people should reproduce. These few guidelines may work on a very small scale but they are hardly sufficient to serve as a guide for people living in a large and complex society, so the following books of Exodus and Leviticus make up for this absence by stipulating a series of commandments—613 in total—that govern individual and community affairs. These commandments range from highly specific dictates about proper clothing, food, and herding practices, to general rules forbidding murder, theft, and adultery, and they also stipulate punishments for many of the violations they describe. In Genesis, morality has been a problem in that people have little inclination to be good on their own. Exodus presents a solution to this problem by giving people extremely detailed guidelines to follow and instilling the fear of punishment in humans as a means of encouraging them to behave morally. The growing complexity of moral law reflects the growing complexity of society, which in Exodus encompasses hundreds of thousands of people, rather than the handful of families described in Genesis.

Moreover, the Book of Exodus shows that morality consists of a wide range of duties. This view of morality is made explicit in the Ten Commandments, which depict three different kinds of obligations. The first type of duty is religious, which is embodied in the commandments to cease worshipping other gods, to stop making idols, to refrain from using Yahweh’s name in vain, and to sanctify one day of the week. The commandments then move on to social obligations, requiring the Israelites to honor their parents and forbidding them to murder, commit adultery, steal, or lie. The final kind of duty that the Ten

Commandments present is the duty to oneself, which is expressed in the final commandment, the prohibition on coveting. Coveting is an internal action, one that has no negative consequences on other people, but is nevertheless important to avoid as it reflects a level of dissatisfaction with oneself that Exodus presents as problematic. The development of morality across time in Hebrew scripture thus culminates in the recognition that ethical behavior in a complex society is a matter not merely of metaphysical beliefs and social actions, but of self-conception and self-awareness.