

## Learning From Experience

Love—arguably the only thing God wants from us—is by its very nature a bizarre and intangible entity. It's a matrix that exists between two beings. Yahweh, being “One,” could therefore not participate in a loving relationship until He created us. That is, His very nature, that of a loving God, could not be meaningfully manifested until there was something toward which He could express that love, and that “something” had to be *like Him* in a way: alive, animate, aware, and, if I'm right about this, capable of loving Him. It was thus an act of pure love when Yahweh created space-time, matter-energy, and organic life, for those things are prerequisites for our physical existence, and more to the point, for our ability to reciprocate His love.

For two beings to love each other, they must have the same nature. That is, an animal can love another animal because they both possess souls, the attribute of “life” expressed in Hebrew as the *nephesh*. So a man can love a dog or a horse, and *vice versa*, but he cannot “love” a sunset or a job or a motorcycle. But Yahweh's nature is spiritual (Hebrew: *ruach*. See John 4:24). Consequently, for a man to be able to love God, he must have a spirit as well as a soul. We read in Genesis 2:7 that Yahweh “**breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and man became a living being.**” The word translated “breath of life” is neither *nephesh* nor *ruach*—neither soul nor spirit. It's *neshamah*. It is this attribute, exclusive to the human race since it was bestowed on Adam, that distinguishes man from other animals with souls, for it allows him to have a *spiritual nature* in addition to his mortal life. Man is thus uniquely equipped to dwell in a matrix of love with his Creator—something no mere animal can do. Blaise Pascal (1623-1662), the French mathematician, physicist, and philosopher, wrote “There is a God-shaped vacuum in the heart of every man that cannot be filled by any created thing, but only by God, the Creator, made known through Jesus.” That's a pretty fair description of the *neshamah*, if you think about it.

This matrix of love is ephemeral and elusive. It must be offered freely—even unconditionally—or it morphs before our very eyes into something else: an inducement, a bribe, a subtle form of pressure. And it must be accepted on the same terms, or once again it changes imperceptibly into something that is not love at all. Love can be desired, but not acquired. It can be given, but not forced upon its object. It can be offered, but not delivered. It can be accepted, but not seized. Love cannot be bought, sold, bartered, or cajoled. It cannot be earned, coerced, or programmed. It can only be freely given and voluntarily received.

Returning someone's offering of love requires choice—free will—for without it, love degenerates into something less, such as loyalty, fidelity, gratitude, politeness, or obedience. Therefore, as strange as it sounds, in order for the concept of love to have any meaning whatsoever, it must be possible—even permissible—*not* to love. Angels, apparently, do not have this capacity. They are created spirit beings who function like soldiers: their nature is to do what the Commander says to do, and if they rebel (for like all soldiers, they *do* have the capability of disobedience, though not the privilege), they will be punished, sent to the brig, as it were. When an angel does what Yahweh commands, he is demonstrating loyalty and obedience, not love. And conversely, if the angel rebels and becomes a demon, he is not showing a lack of love: technically, he is “only” being treacherous and defiant. We humans, on the other hand, have a choice: we may reciprocate God's love or not—it's our decision. Unlike the angels, when we obey God's precepts (if we're doing it *because* they're His precepts), we're demonstrating our love, for it is our prerogative to ignore Him if we want to.

At this point, people steeped in conventional Christian theology think they've spotted a glaring flaw in my logic. What about hell? *Oh sure, we have the God-given right to ignore Him and refuse to reciprocate His love, but if we do, He'll consign us to an eternity of torment in hell fire. Some choice!* We must ask ourselves (in the undying words of the serpent in the Garden), “Has God indeed said this?” He *does* speak of everlasting affliction in hell for Satan and his followers. But for those who simply fail to love Yahweh, the scriptures speak not of punishment but rather of *destruction*, of becoming nothing, of ceasing to be. What's the difference? “Hell's torments” and “destruction” sound equally bad, you may be thinking. But they're not. One who is “destroyed” *no longer exists*: someone in this state cannot, by definition, suffer “eternal torment.” One Hebrew word used to describe this state (unfortunately translated “corruption”) is *beliy*, which actually means nothingness—it is the word for negation, literally: “no, not, or without.” This isn't heaven, I'll grant you, but in comparison with hell's eternal waking torment, it is the most tender of mercies. Death is not remotely the same thing as damnation.

Hell, it turns out, is reserved for those who *prevent others* from choosing to reciprocate the love of Yahweh, a group coterminous with those who have been indwelled by demonic spirits in the same way believers are indwelled by Yahweh's Holy Spirit. They're “born from below” as we are “born from above.” Those slated for destruction or “nothingness,” by contrast, *aren't born at all* in a spiritual sense. Their *neshamah* remains an empty vessel, a “vacuum” inhabited by no god of any shape, true or false. It's one thing to choose to pass up a good thing yourself. Yes, it's a waste, a squandering of potential blessing, but at least it's *your* blessing you're throwing away—it's your decision, your prerogative. It's something else entirely to force, trick, or otherwise seek to prevent other people

from experiencing that good thing for themselves. Making available to mankind the choice to love Him was Yahweh's whole point in creating us. As we saw in the previous chapter, God considers it murder to thwart the loving relationship He has offered to us. And spiritual murder is a capital crime. If somebody offered to give you a million dollars, but you, whether out of suspicion, pride, or apathy, told him to go away and leave you alone, your relative poverty could not logically be blamed on your would-be patron. It might, however, be blamed on a third party who talked you out of accepting the free gift.

Yahweh obviously wants us to obey Him, but it's entirely up to us—there's no pressure, bribery or inducement for acquiescence, nor threats for noncompliance. There are *consequences*, of course. We reap whatever we sow. But Yahweh does not demand that we plant wheat instead of opium poppies. He merely points out what can be expected to thrive in this soil we call human life, and what will best nourish us after the harvest. The point is that we humans are creatures imbued with choice: love God or not, obey Him or not, trust Him or not. The only real penalties associated with our failure to love, obey, and trust Him are intrinsic in the act of rebuffing our Benefactor. As we have seen throughout our study of the Torah, this "Owner's Manual" of God's is there for our benefit, not His ego. He told us these things so that we might, through following His precepts, enjoy happier, healthier lives, both physically and spiritually. His only motivation for issuing these instructions was that He loved us.

So we should not be surprised to find that the "penalties" for noncompliance are usually built in, not added on. (For example, although there is a penalty imposed for murder, the "penalty" for *not enforcing this penalty* is the gradual unraveling of society. It's inherent in the nature of injustice. It's a "natural law.") If you insist on eating pigs, don't blame Yahweh when you contract trichinosis. If you marry your sister, don't blame God if your children are plagued with hereditary diseases brought on by dredging recessive genes to the surface. If you refuse to honor Yahweh in your public institutions, don't blame Him when your civilization degenerates into chaos and despair. If you refuse to keep the Sabbath, don't blame Yahweh when the Day of Judgment sneaks up on you like a thief in the night. Because He loves us, He told us everything we need to know concerning life and godliness. It's not God's fault if we choose to ignore His truth.

It bears repeating: history is a stern schoolmaster. If we do not learn its lessons, we will flunk out and have to repeat the class. Solomon, bemoaning the vanity, the emptiness, of man's labors under the sun, identifies the reason for our spiritual frustration: we don't remember the lessons of the past. We refuse to learn from experience. We choose ignorance over wisdom. **"That which has been is what will be, that which is done is what will be done, and there is nothing new under the sun. Is**

there anything of which it may be said, 'See, this is new'? It has already been in ancient times before us. There is no remembrance of former things, nor will there be any remembrance of things that are to come by those who will come after." (Ecclesiastes 1:9-11) So his counsel, after all was said and done, was to remember what God had told us. "Remember now your Creator in the days of your youth, before the difficult days come, and the years draw near when you say, 'I have no pleasure in them.'" (Ecclesiastes 12:1) *Remember*. Choose to learn from the experiences, insights, and revelations Yahweh has recorded in His word, for His counsel is refuge against the insanity of the lost world. Remember your Creator now; heed His precepts "before the difficult days come." Make no mistake: they *are* coming.

#### REMEMBER WHAT GOD HAS DONE AND SAID

(888) *Know that Yahweh chastises us when we need correction. "Remember what Yahweh your God did to Miriam on the way when you came out of Egypt!"* (Deuteronomy 24:9) The story of "what Yahweh did to Miriam" is recorded in Numbers 12. In a nutshell, Miriam (backed by Aaron, who, we get the feeling, never instigated anything in his entire life, good *or* bad) criticized Moses for marrying a black woman, an Ethiopian. We are not told if his first wife, Zipporah (a Midianite, from Northern Arabia) had died, or if this new wife was taken in addition to her. I would guess it was the former, since we read of no similar objection lodged by either Zipporah or her father Reuel/Jethro, both of whom were known to speak their mind. Zipporah would have been over sixty years old at this time. We last see her in the Biblical record, perhaps two years before this point, in Exodus 18, so it's hard to know for sure what had happened. But in any case, God had not outlawed polygamy, nor would He. This leads me to conclude that Miriam's criticism was racially motivated.

Yahweh had nothing to say either way about Mo's second marriage. His issue was that someone would have the temerity to speak against His chosen prophet—nay, more than a prophet: Moses was, He pointed out, a servant who was "faithful in all My house; I speak with him face to face [not in dreams and visions, like ordinary prophets], even plainly, not in dark sayings." (Numbers 12:7-8) Yahweh, though angry with Miriam, hadn't lost His sense of humor. It was as if He said, "You say you don't like black skin, Miriam? Okay, I aim to please." "And when the cloud [the Shekinah] departed from above the tabernacle, suddenly Miriam became leprous, as white as snow." (Numbers 12:10) This, of course, meant that she would be ostracized from the congregation of Israel, forced to live outside the camp. No more lofty status for her; no more of the perks that came with being the big sister of the guy who ran the whole country. A horrified and repentant Aaron, not

knowing what lay in store for him, pleaded with Moses to intercede for their stricken sister, which Moses did. And Yahweh did as His servant had requested, though He gave Miriam seven long days as a leper in which to contemplate her sins.

And what are we to learn from this? First, and most basically, Yahweh is not reluctant to chastise us—His own children—when we need His rod of correction. In my long experience, His punishment always fits the crime—neither too harsh nor too lenient—and not infrequently, it’s just as poetic as it was here. Modern Christians who don’t believe in corporal punishment should be aware that Yahweh Himself uses it to instruct and guide us. Second, we need not defend our status as servants of God (if that is indeed what we are). Yahweh is the One who vindicates us. For our part, we should endeavor to be as Moses was described: “very humble, more than all men who were on the face of the earth.” Third, the incident happened when they were “on the way...out of Egypt.” That is, if you’re still living “in the world,” don’t expect to feel God’s rod of correction across your backside. It’s only when you leave it, when you begin your journey toward the Promised Land—life under Yahweh’s sovereignty—that you are ready for His guidance. Remember, a rudder is useless as long as the ship is tied up at the dock; it can only steer a vessel that’s moving.

- (889) *Recognize God’s tests for what they are.* **“And Yahweh spoke to Moses and Aaron, saying, ‘Separate yourselves from among this congregation, that I may consume them in a moment.’ Then they fell on their faces, and said, ‘O God, the God of the spirits of all flesh, shall one man sin, and You be angry with all the congregation?’”** (Numbers 16:20-22) For some people, it doesn’t matter how humble you are. If God exalts you, they’re going to resent it and covet your status before Him. Such was the case with Miriam, as we just saw. And now, in Numbers 16, we have a similar tale, the story of Korah’s intended coup. It’s a classic confrontation between man’s ways and God’s. We begin with bloodline: Korah was a Levite of the house of Kohath (the same clan as Moses and Aaron). If the Kohathite Levites were to be the leaders, he figured, why Moses, and not him? As a supporting cast, Korah’s two main cohorts were Reubenites, that is, descendants of Jacob’s firstborn. (That ought to entitle them some added prestige, according to human wisdom.) But Korah didn’t stop there: he next recruited two hundred and fifty of the leading men of Israel. In doing so, he figured he’d wrapped up the “electoral college.” If this had been a democracy, Moses would have been a lame duck, except for one small detail: in the immortal words of John Knox, “A man with God is always in the majority.”

Moses, who remembered his sister's little mutiny, knew this couldn't end well. So he devised a test whereby God might demonstrate whom He had chosen to be the leader: all of Korah's two hundred and fifty "elders" were to present censers with incense. If Yahweh selected them, their smoke would rise toward heaven, but if only Aaron's did, then he and Moses would have been revealed (again) to be the chosen leaders. Simple enough, but it never got that far. The rebels gathered together not only the two hundred and fifty, but the whole congregation to help them intimidate Moses and Aaron. This is where our current precept comes in: Yahweh now says, in effect, "That's it. I'm going to wipe them all out and start over. You two may not want to be standing so close. This is going to get ugly."

Moses and his brother recognized the threat as a test, and immediately pleaded with God to consider His own character: a just God, One not willing to destroy the righteous with the wicked. So the challenge was changed: if Korah and his big shots lived happily ever after (or even died a normal death) then *that* was to be the sign that Yahweh had not chosen Moses. **"But if Yahweh creates a new thing, and the earth opens its mouth and swallows them up with all that belongs to them, and they go down alive into the pit, then you will understand that these men have rejected Yahweh."** (Numbers 16:30) What were the chances of that happening? Zero, if there was no God, or if He hadn't called Moses to the position of leadership in Israel. But the words had barely left Mo's lips when that very thing happened. Then fire from Yahweh came and consumed the two hundred and fifty ringleaders. God had made His point.

That should have ended the debate, but no. **"On the next day all the congregation of the children of Israel complained against Moses and Aaron, saying, 'You have killed the people of Yahweh.'"** (Numbers 16:41) I don't get it. If Korah and his two Reubenite cohorts had been "the people of Yahweh," then why didn't God protect them? And if *Moses and Aaron* had somehow made the ground swallow them up—tents and all—you'd think that maybe the Israelites might have figured out it wasn't such a hot idea to defy them to their faces. But the Israelites, just like the world *we* live in, had lost the ability to reason, to weigh the evidence, to recognize the hand of God at work among them. *Don't confuse us with facts; our minds are made up!* So Yahweh was compelled to sing the song again: second verse, same as the first. **"And Yahweh spoke to Moses [*again*], saying, 'Get away from among this congregation, that I may consume them in a moment.'"** (Numbers 16:44-45) At this point, I (being slow but teachable) might have said, "Okay, I see Your point. I'm out of here!" But Moses, once again being technically disobedient to Yahweh but willing to defend His character to the death,

simply fell on his face and pleaded for mercy for his people. Then, as the plague began, Moses instructed Aaron to hurry and perform what the *first test* had proposed as a sign: intercede for the people with a censer burning incense as a prayer to Yahweh. And God did indeed halt the plague, but not before it had slain another 14,700 rebellious Israelites.

Some things never change. The world still doesn't want to consider the evidence—choosing to believe manmade myths over God's revealed truth ninety-nine percent of the time. But what is "the congregation of man" going to do when all the faithful have been removed from the earth—when there is no longer a Moses to plead for mercy for them, or an Aaron running out among them praying to God for the plague to stop? The core issue will not have changed: the world will still be figuring out whom it will follow. The choice, in the end, will be between Yahshua (Yahweh's Man—for whom both Moses and Aaron are a prototype), and the Antichrist (Satan's boy, his Korah-equivalent). Remarkably, we are told that the Antichrist and his false prophet will end up pretty much like Korah and his Reubenite buddies did—and for roughly the same reason: **"Then the beast was captured, and with him the false prophet who worked signs in his presence, by which he deceived those who received the mark of the beast and those who worshiped his image. These two were cast alive into the lake of fire burning with brimstone."** (Revelation 19:20)

(890) *Don't make up your own religion.* **"You shall not at all do as we are doing here today—every man doing whatever is right in his own eyes—for as yet you have not come to the rest and the inheritance which Yahweh your God is giving you. But when you cross over the Jordan and dwell in the land which Yahweh your God is giving you to inherit, and He gives you rest from all your enemies round about, so that you dwell in safety, then there will be the place where Yahweh your God chooses to make His name abide."** (Deuteronomy 12:8-11) "Crossing over the Jordan" is seen in some of the old hymns as "entering heaven" (doubtless an artifact of Bunyan's allegory *The Pilgrim's Progress*). But it's no such thing. It's a picture of commencing one's life as a believer in Yahweh—in this world. The fact is that the battles don't even really *begin* until we've entered this Promised Land. The point of the passage is that within the believer's earthly experience, our faith in Yahweh's grace must lead us to faith in His instructions as well. It's disingenuous to say we're relying on God for our salvation when we refuse to take His word or counsel about anything else in life.

The believer's life is like a room with two doors, a window, and a table and chair sitting in the middle. God invites us to leave the world and enter the room through the first door (salvation), sit in the chair, attend to

whatever tasks we find upon the table that need to be done, and when we're finished, exit by the second door—the one that leads to heaven. Subject Number One enters, only to be distracted by what he sees through the window (the world). He never sits down and never does what God prepared for him to do, but he never impacts the world either, for he's not out there anymore. When he leaves the room, though nothing of value has been accomplished, he feels fatigued and frustrated. Subject Number Two, on the other hand, enters the room and never bothers to look out the window at all. But he doesn't sit down and follow God's instructions, either. Rather, he sets about busily decorating the room, laying carpet, hanging curtains, painting the walls, and rearranging the furniture. A lot of things get done, though none of them were on God's to-do list—a fact that totally eludes him. He finally leaves the room, exhausted and famished but inordinately proud of his “accomplishments.”

Subject Number Three, however, enters the room and, because he really trusts Yahweh to know what's best, does as he was told: he sits at the table to begin the work God assigned to him. Once seated (resting in God's word), he discovers all sorts of things the other two missed. First, there's the list of tasks God left for him, so he knows precisely what he needs to be doing with his time. Next he sees that the view out the window is quite different from this angle: he can now see what's really going on out there in the world, and what it will take to make it a better place—information he needs in order to address his to-do list. He notices there's a phone on the table, so he can talk to the world, listen to their problems, counsel and comfort them, and even call 911 for them if need be. He notices a menu for a nice little Kosher Deli nearby, so he orders himself a tasty lunch to sustain him through the day. When it's finally time to go home, his to-do list has been seriously depleted, but his spirits have not.

Subject Number One is what Paul would call a “carnal Christian,” someone guided not by the Spirit of God, but rather by their own flesh, “behaving like a mere man,” as he says in I Corinthians 3:3. Number Two is the “religious Christian,” someone so busy doing “good works,” he never takes time to consider whether they're actually what God wants him to do—confusing progress with process, generating lots of heat but very little light. But Number Three is the “obedient believer” spoken of by John: **“Now by this we know that we know Him, if we keep His commandments. He who says, ‘I know Him,’ and does not keep His commandments, is a liar, and the truth is not in him. But whoever keeps His word, truly the love of God is perfected in him. By this we know that we are in Him. He who says he abides in Him ought himself also to walk just as He walked.”** (I John 2:3-6) How did Yahshua

walk? He did the will of His “Father,” Yahweh. He was obedient, even to the point of death.

Our present precept speaks to all three types. Moses admonishes us that as we enter the life of a believer, we are to (1) leave the world’s ways behind us, (2) prepare to fight our spiritual battles in God’s strength, not our own, and (3) commune with Yahweh according to His direction, not our invention. There is a place, He says, where He will “choose to make His name abide.” We are to meet Him there, and *only* there—not where our spiritual adversaries are accustomed to bowing to their false gods. Although God may be present in religion, in nature, or in the better impulses of the human psyche, we are instructed *not to seek Him there*. We are, rather, to meet Him in His sanctuary, the place where His name abides and His Spirit dwells. And where is that? Yahshua promised us, “I will pray the Father, and He will give you another Helper, that He may abide with you forever, even the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive, because it neither sees Him or knows Him; but you know Him, for He dwells with you and will be in you.” (John 14:16-17) Or as Paul asked, “Do you not know that you are the temple of God and that the Spirit of God dwells in you?” (I Corinthians 3:16) God is with us and in us. Once we have “crossed the Jordan,” we don’t have very far to go at all.

- (891) *Verify God’s word through historical inquiry.* “For ask now concerning the days that are past, which were before you, since the day that God created man on the earth, and ask from one end of heaven to the other, whether any great thing like this has happened, or anything like it has been heard. Did any people ever hear the voice of God speaking out of the midst of the fire, as you have heard, and live? Or did God ever try to go and take for Himself a nation from the midst of another nation, by trials, by signs, by wonders, by war, by a mighty hand and an outstretched arm, and by great terrors, according to all that Yahweh your God did for you in Egypt before your eyes? To you it was shown, that you might know that Yahweh Himself is God; there is none other besides Him.” (Deuteronomy 4:32-35) It’s abundantly clear that choice is our prerogative. But real choice requires two things: knowledge and the freedom to act upon it. Here Yahweh is saying to put His words and deeds to the test—compare what He has done for you to the résumé of any conceivable rival. Acquire the knowledge necessary to make an informed decision. Conduct historical, scientific, or philosophical inquiry, for the facts—the truth of the matter—will vindicate His word at every turn. It’s a dare, a challenge: God has nothing to fear from “full disclosure.” He’s not looking for “blind faith.” He wants us to open our eyes: to exercise faith based on historical reality.

**“Out of heaven He let you hear His voice, that He might instruct you; on earth He showed you His great fire, and you heard His words out of the midst of the fire. And because He loved your fathers, therefore He chose their descendants after them; and He brought you out of Egypt with His Presence, with His mighty power, driving out from before you nations greater and mightier than you, to bring you in, to give you their land as an inheritance, as it is this day.”** (Deuteronomy 4:36-38) The history of Israel’s deliverance is a metaphor for God’s calling upon all of us, if only we’ll choose to follow Him. We too “hear His voice.” We too “see His fire.” We too are brought by His presence and power out of the world that held us in bondage. And formidable forces of evil that would threaten, confound, and beguile us are still driven out from before us, if we will but trust in Yahweh to keep His word. The evidence the Israelites saw and heard was admittedly more palpable, more tangible, than what we experience today. They *saw* the pillar of fire; they *heard* the thundering voice of Yahweh upon the mountaintop; they smelled the smoke and felt the earth tremble. But for all that, they did not have what we do: sure knowledge of our deliverance from the bondage of Adam’s curse—historical confirmation that Yahweh has kept His word, fulfilling the promise of redemption through the sacrifice of His Messiah—redemption that was prophesied in hundreds of the Torah’s precepts. The evidence of God’s glory we enjoy today is no less real than that which awed the Israelites at the foot of Mount Sinai. The fact that Yahweh now speaks in a still, small voice instead of a thunderous roar should neither lessen our awareness nor mitigate our awe.

- (892) *Base your conclusions on truth, and apply logic to formulate a plan of action.* **“Therefore know this day, and consider it in your heart, that Yahweh Himself is God in heaven above and on the earth beneath; there is no other. You shall therefore keep His statutes and His commandments which I command you today, that it may go well with you and with your children after you, and that you may prolong your days in the land which Yahweh your God is giving you for all time.”** (Deuteronomy 4:39-40) The “therefore” refers back to the indisputable evidence of Yahweh’s glory Moses has been talking about for the last few Precepts—and I would include the historical evidence for the Messiah’s redemptive act in that admonition. The simple, profound conclusion we are encouraged to reach is that Yahweh alone is God. And because He is God, He has the right to call the shots: we are to “keep His statutes and commandments.” Note that the promise attached to the precept is virtually identical to the Fifth Commandment of the Decalogue: **“Honor your father [a surrogate for Yahweh] and your mother [symbolic of His Holy Spirit], that your days may be long upon the land which Yahweh your God is giving you.”** (Exodus 20:12) Honoring—taking seriously—God and His

*Ruach Qodesh* is therefore equated to “keeping His statutes.” It reminds me of what John said in the passage quoted above: “**Now by this we know that we know Him, if we keep His commandments.**” (I John 2:3)

At the risk of appearing to beat a dead horse, let me point out (again) that even though the Land was given to Israel “for all time,” it has *not* “gone well with them.” Because they did not “keep His statutes,” Israel was evicted from their Land lock, stock, and barrel—*twice*. If (as some of them claim) they *have* been following Yahweh’s statutes this whole time then Yahweh is either a liar or incompetent. It’s only in the last century or so that the Jews have returned to their inheritance in any significant numbers, or with any significant political presence (and that’s only because Yahweh still has a boatload of prophecies to fulfill concerning their restoration). Yahweh did *not* tell them to “keep the statutes and commandments that *your rabbis* will command you to do.” By now (900 pages into this book) you should realize that the two bodies of Law—Torah and Talmud—bear only a superficial resemblance to each other. But both Old and New Covenant scriptures insist that keeping Yahweh’s actual commandments—not the traditions of men—is how we can “know God” and “prolong our days” in the land He has given us.

- (893) *Don’t let your prosperity distract you from the God who provided it. “So it shall be, when Yahweh your God brings you into the land of which He swore to your fathers, to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, to give you large and beautiful cities which you did not build, houses full of all good things, which you did not fill, hewn-out wells which you did not dig, vineyards and olive trees which you did not plant—when you have eaten and are full—then beware, lest you forget Yahweh who brought you out of the land of Egypt, from the house of bondage.”* (Deuteronomy 6:10-12) Who among us can truthfully claim to be “self-made?” You might declare, “I worked hard, kept my nose clean, learned how to get ahead in life, and the success I’m enjoying is entirely because of my own efforts.” But that’s a narrow, provincial, and dare I say, disingenuous view. Who gave you the intelligence, the aptitude, the opportunity, the physical ability, and the shelter from unforeseen disaster that were baseline prerequisites for your success before you even lifted a finger? Who lined up the intangibles for you—that first job, the chance meeting, the accident you narrowly avoided, the fact that you were born in, say, North America in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century instead of in Central Africa in the 18<sup>th</sup>? You would not be precisely what you are (whether for better or for worse) without a thousand factors that are entirely out of your control.

I’m not saying we are strictly the products of our environment. I’m saying, rather, that we are responsible before God to play the hand we’re

dealt. When we're blessed, we are to acknowledge His bounty and provision. When afflicted, we are to cry out for mercy to the One who has the power to deliver us. Yes, hard work and discipline are good things. But in the end, what we have is the sum total of what we've done with the gifts—and the challenges—Yahweh has given us. Israel's entrance into the Promised Land serves as a microcosm of this principle. Like us today, they were given the opportunity to stand on the shoulders of those who had gone before them, reaping where they had not sewn. Like us, the blessings they were given could either be viewed as gifts from God or things to which they were entitled by right of conquest. But Yahweh warned them—and us—not to let prosperity or accomplishment cloud our memory, our sense of gratitude, or our appreciation of how we got here.

- (894) *Remember who the real God is.* **“You shall not go after other gods, the gods of the peoples who are all around you (for Yahweh your God is a jealous God among you), lest the anger of Yahweh your God be aroused against you and destroy you from the face of the earth.”** (Deuteronomy 6:14-15) This is the same basic tenet as the Second Commandment—an admonition to honor Yahweh as God (Creator-deity, Master, Provider, and Savior) and at the same time to refrain from showing reverence, devotion, or adulation to other things other people might worship. Back in bronze age Israel, these things were usually easy to spot—false “gods,” with names like Ba'al, Chemosh and Molech, with characteristics and desires men had ascribed to them, idols that represented them, and cults built around them. But today, the “other gods” people pursue are usually far more subtle: wealth, sex, power, fame, pleasure, respect, or popularity. They could manifest themselves as almost anything: a fancier car, a bigger house, a greener lawn, a lower golf score, or a higher high. They might be “political causes” like fighting for world peace, saving the environment from its inhabitants, pressing one's views on gun control, abortion, or the right to copulate with whomever or whatever one felt like, or simply escaping from the realities and responsibilities of human civilization. These “other gods” always seem to be just out of reach, constantly requiring just a little more devotion, a little more sacrifice. Our “other gods” are, in short, anything that stands between us and Yahweh—things that distract us, that broach no recourse to Godly counsel, things in which our relationship with Yahweh is declared to be “beside the point.”

Interestingly, things need not be *intrinsically* bad to be characterized as the “other gods” about which Yahweh has warned us. In fact, many of the same things could just as easily be right or wrong—depending on how they affect our walk with God. Wealth can easily distract us, and yet Yahweh showered great wealth on some of the most faithful men in the

Biblical record: Job, Abraham, David, etc.—without corrupting their character. Sex is implicit in the very first command Yahweh issued to the human race: “Go forth and multiply.” And yet its practice outside of God’s guidelines—holy matrimony between one man and one woman for a lifetime—has been a constant source of distraction in our world since mankind left the Garden, “another god” that we should have left alone.

Religion is another example: it can serve as a matrix in which like minded believers can congregate to separate themselves from the influences of the world—acting as a medium through which holiness (becoming set-apart and consecrated to Yahweh, being called out of the world) is worked out in practical terms. But it can all too easily become a substitute for the very God it is designed to honor. I recently reread John Bunyan’s classic allegory *The Pilgrim’s Progress*. I realize it’s merely semantic nitpicking on my part, but Bunyan constantly refers to “religion” as if it’s the sum total of the Christian experience in this world. It is nothing of the sort. Rather, it is a loaded gun—an inherently dangerous but potentially useful implement that can be used to either bring home dinner or kill it’s owner. It must be handled with great care.

Moses uses a word here that may seem odd to our ears: he says Yahweh is a “jealous” God. Actually, he repeats this six times in the Torah. The word in Hebrew is *qanna*, from a verb meaning to be zealous, jealous, or even envious. The *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament* points out the basic idea: “zeal for another’s property is envy, while zeal for one’s own property is jealousy.” Since “we are not our own; we have been bought with a price”—the blood of the Lamb of God—we belong to Yahweh. If we have chosen to accept the terms of our redemption, we are by our own admission His property. He is quite within His “rights,” then, to claim our exclusive love as His own, becoming angry if we squander our affections on “other gods.” It bears repeating. Although Yahweh’s children would never bow to a Molech, Zeus, or Allah, we can find ourselves “worshipping” other gods without even realizing it. Beware!

- (895) *Be diligent about observing Yahweh’s statutes.* **“You shall diligently keep the commandments of Yahweh your God, His testimonies, and His statutes which He has commanded you. And you shall do what is right and good in the sight of Yahweh, that it may be well with you, and that you may go in and possess the good land of which Yahweh swore to your fathers, to cast out all your enemies from before you, as Yahweh has spoken.”** (Deuteronomy 6:17-19) If this were as obvious as it looks, God wouldn’t have had to repeat it so many times and in so many ways. Several factors bear mentioning. (1) You can’t “diligently keep the commandments of Yahweh” if you don’t know what

they are. That's why it's so important to study God's word. Don't assume anything. Don't take anyone's word for it (and that includes mine). Look it up for yourself. Let the Holy Spirit teach you, bringing to remembrance what Yahweh has instructed as you walk through this world.

(2) Doing "what is right in the sight of Yahweh" is for our benefit, not His. The natural result of compliance is that "it may be well with you." The "enemies" Yahweh promised to cast out if we obey Him are not necessarily people. They could be our own self-destructive tendencies, the "lusts that war against our members." "Possessing the good land" is living in peace and security as believing mortals *in this life*, and we'll never do that if we refuse to trust Yahweh to know what's best for us here and now.

(3) We are not to define our own standards of right and wrong, and we are certainly not to defer to clerics and kings to define good and evil for us. Rather, we are to "do what is right and good in the sight of Yahweh." His world, His rules.

And (4) note that we are to observe three categories of instruction. First are Yahweh's "commandments"—those things that are to be manifested as a constant, ongoing reality in our lives. These are not so much things we *do* as things we *are*. They invariably have a spiritual undercurrent, even if they seem on the surface to deal with outward behavior. For example, the commandment to honor one's father and mother, while valid and binding on the literal face of it, actually means we are to take Yahweh and His Holy Spirit seriously. Second are His "testimonies"—the characterizations, symbols, and metaphors that pepper the Torah, and indeed, the entire Bible from one end to the other. The tabernacle, the sacrifices, the festival calendar: all of these things and more conspire to inform us, if we will but heed them, of Yahweh's unfolding plan for our redemption. And third are His "statutes"—the rules that govern our human interactions and guard our health, things that make civilization *civil* and encourage us to demonstrate our trust in Yahweh's love by keeping His word.

(896) *Look for the meaning behind God's statutes.* "When your son asks you in time to come, saying, 'What is the meaning of the testimonies, the statutes, and the judgments which Yahweh our God has commanded you?' then you shall say to your son: 'We were slaves of Pharaoh in Egypt, and Yahweh brought us out of Egypt with a mighty hand; and Yahweh showed signs and wonders before our eyes, great and severe, against Egypt, Pharaoh, and all his household. Then He brought us out from there, that He might bring us in, to give us the land of which He swore to our fathers. And Yahweh commanded us to observe all these statutes, to fear Yahweh our God, for our good always, that He might preserve us alive, as it is this day. Then

**it will be righteousness for us, if we are careful to observe all these commandments before Yahweh our God, as He has commanded us.”**

(Deuteronomy 6:20-25) Allow me to boil this down to its essentials. *What does the Torah mean? Deliverance! Why should we heed all these instructions?* Because Yahweh is interested in our welfare, liberty, preservation, and righteousness. Revering our God and observing His statutes will naturally result in all of these good things.

The underlying assumption here is that the “testimonies, statutes, and judgments” of the Torah *do* have meaning. They’re not only rules for successful living (though they are certainly that). Yes, the *halakhah*, the path that one walks, is the focus of the statutes (Hebrew *choq*: a regulation, decree, ordinance, or boundary; a clear prescription of what one should do). But beyond the statutes, there are also “judgments” (*mishpat*: the act of deciding a legal dispute or case; the proclamation of a verdict; the dispensing of justice) and “testimonies” (*edah*: a witness—an object used as a memorial or remembrance of a covenant).

It is this last category—the *edah* or testimony—that completely eludes the rabbis. In Genesis 31, we see Jacob erecting a heap of stones as a pillar—a witness of the covenant he had made between himself and his deceitful father-in-law Laban. The reason is stated in verse 52: **“This heap is a witness, and this pillar is a witness, that I will not pass beyond this heap to you, and you will not pass beyond this heap and this pillar to me, for harm.”** Yahweh has characterized the Torah as the same sort of “witness” or “testimony” against Israel. As Jacob’s pillar had cautionary significance to the parties of the covenant, so did the Torah. As the pillar was more than a pointless heap of rocks, so the Torah was more than a meaningless collection of rules. Both parties, Yahweh and Israel (and through them, us) were expected—were *required*—to consider the meaning of the *edah*, or testimony. And what was the meaning? What was the very first thing the Hebrew father was to answer his son when asked that question? **“We were slaves of Pharaoh in Egypt, and Yahweh brought us out of Egypt with a mighty hand.”** That is, we were in bondage to sin in the world, and Yahweh delivered us. How? By sending His Messiah, His only begotten Son, to fulfill the promise of all the bloody sacrifices prescribed in the Torah. They were signs, witnesses, *testimonies*, and every last one of them pointed toward Yahshua.

(897) *Warn Israel concerning their wicked ways. “Now therefore, write down this song for yourselves, and teach it to the children of Israel; put it in their mouths, that this song may be a witness for Me against the children of Israel.”*

(Deuteronomy 31:19) Knowing what’s coming can be a curse if it’s bad

news for someone you love. Sometimes I think being omniscient must be really depressing for Yahweh. The context here is God's prophetic assessment of what Israel would do with the revelation they'd been given. It wasn't pretty: **"This people will rise and play the harlot with the gods of the foreigners of the land.... They will forsake me and break my covenant.... My anger shall be aroused against them.... They shall be devoured.... I will surely hide My face in that day because of all the evil which they have done."** (Deuteronomy 31:16-18) These weren't hypotheticals. There was no "if" involved. These things *would* happen. So Moses was instructed to write a song (recorded in chapter 32)—sort of a parallel to the letters John was told to send to the seven churches in Revelation 2 and 3—a prophecy of sweeping proportions outlining the future history of Israel after Moses was gone.

He begins (vs. 1-4) by reminding them who the Rock of their salvation is. Then (vs. 5-14) he recounts God's calling of Israel, their special place in His heart. But Israel's rebellion, apostasy, and pride is then recounted (vs. 15-21), including a tantalizing preview of the "foolish" gentiles (the *ekklesia*) who would take up the mantle of truth they'd dropped (driving Israel crazy by doing so). Verses 22-27 declare that if Yahweh had not given his word to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, He would have allowed Israel to disappear from the face of the earth—He's that angry. He laments their ignorance (vs. 28-33) and recounts His determination to show them where they went wrong—no matter how painful it is (vs. 34-38). Finally (vs. 39-43), Yahweh promises vengeance upon His enemies and atonement for His people—calling once again on the gentiles to rejoice over the restoration of Israel.

I don't really know how an observant Jew today can look at Deuteronomy 32 and keep from cringing. Moses did his job: he recorded for all time Yahweh's "witness against the children of Israel." It has all come about precisely as He predicted—right up to verse 38, at which point Israel's **"power is gone, and there is no one remaining, bond or free,"** and He challenges them to call upon their false gods to save them. When did they reach this point? 1945—the final year of the Nazi holocaust. Since then, we have seen only glimmers of the coming fulfillment of the rest of the Song of Moses. Yahweh says, **"Now see that I, even I, am He, and there is no God besides Me; I kill and I make alive; I wound and I heal; Nor is there any who can deliver from My hand. For I raise My hand to heaven, and say, 'As I live forever, if I whet My glittering sword, and My hand takes hold on judgment, I will render vengeance to My enemies, and repay those who hate Me. I will make My arrows drunk with blood, and My sword shall devour flesh, with the blood of the slain and the captives, from the heads of the leaders of the enemy.' Rejoice, O Gentiles, with His people; for He will avenge the blood of His servants, and render vengeance to**

**His adversaries; He will provide atonement for His land and His people.”**

(Deuteronomy 32:39-43) That’s a somewhat squishy, though thoroughly consistent, view of the coming Tribulation. If God’s word has proved one hundred percent accurate up to our current point in history (and it has), what are the chances He’ll drop the ball now—now that He’s sprinting past the two yard line? Only a fool would bet against His crossing the goal line—and soon. Israel has been warned. We’ve *all* been warned.

#### TAKE HEED

- (898) *Don’t mistake God’s blessing for your own greatness. “For what great nation is there that has God so near to it, as Yahweh our God is to us, for whatever reason we may call upon Him? And what great nation is there that has such statutes and righteous judgments as are in all this law which I set before you this day? Only take heed to yourself, and diligently keep yourself, lest you forget the things your eyes have seen, and lest they depart from your heart all the days of your life.”* (Deuteronomy 4:7-9) It is easy for us to take our blessings for granted. It’s not so much that we feel entitled to them; it’s that we become so used to them, we never even think about where they came from. At this point in their history, Israel had seen God’s mighty hand up close and personal—or at least their parents had. These desert pilgrims had never known anything but Yahweh’s miraculous guidance, provision, and instruction: the pillar of cloud and fire, the manna, the water from the rock. Their national deliverance from Egypt was as real to them as, say, World War II was to me—something that had fundamentally shaped their parents’ world view, even though it had passed into history and legend before they were even born. God’s personal presence, and a leader who talked with Him face to face, were all they had ever known. It would have been easy to forget that this was *not normal*: other nations had no such privileged personal relationship with their Creator and Deliverer.

Moses therefore cautions the children of Israel to be cognizant of their unique position—and their singular responsibility. He knew that when they entered the Promised Land, the comparatively “normal” routine of life they found there could easily distract them from their unique and amazing heritage. As they fought the inevitable battles, it would be tempting to credit their victories to their own valor or superior strength, rather than to Yahweh’s provision. But if they always kept in mind “the things their eyes had seen” on a national level, the natural tendency to ascribe God’s blessing to their own effort would be kept at bay.

This principle is just as valid on a personal level. Anyone who has witnessed Yahweh’s greatness for any length of time is in danger of taking

it for granted. Anyone who has enjoyed God's blessing runs the risk of becoming less thankful than he should be. We are cautioned here to "take heed," diligently and purposefully making a point to remember how great our God is, and thankfully recount His blessings.

- (899) *Pass on Yahweh's precepts to future generations. "And teach them to your children and your grandchildren, especially concerning the day you stood before Yahweh your God in Horeb, when Yahweh said to me, 'Gather the people to Me, and I will let them hear My words, that they may learn to fear Me all the days they live on the earth, and that they may teach their children.'" (Deuteronomy 4:9-10)*

At my age, I've seen a remarkable shift in how successive generations view material wealth. My parents and grandparents were products of the Great Depression, so they remained quite frugal even after they no longer had to be. My "baby-boomer" contemporaries, building on our parents' phobias, tended to fixate on money and security. So *our* children and grandchildren—reacting to our obsession with success—all too often squandered their opportunities and despised their birthrights—setting *their* children up for another round of hard times. My point is that the legacy we pass on to future generations is just as often a response to our failures as it is the result of our successes. What we teach our children is shaped more by what we value than by what we say.

What's evident in the material realm is even more true in the spiritual: our children can spot our hypocrisy—the dichotomy between what we say and what we do—a mile away. We can teach God's precepts to our children with our lips, but the lessons will go unheeded if they're not borne out by the way we live our lives. We can tell them to love God and trust Him, but it will all be for naught if we despise and cheat our neighbors. We can instruct them to "honor their parents," but our words will sound hollow indeed if we ship grandma off to a nursing home at the first sign of our own "inconvenience." If we value religious tradition over a personal relationship with Yahweh, our children will sense it. If we trust our own efforts instead of the provision of God, they will know. What we tell them doesn't matter nearly as much as what we do.

The point of teaching our children the ways of God is not to make them well behaved or compliant. Moses reminds us that it's so they might learn to revere Yahweh. And why is that important? Because **"The reverence of Yahweh is the beginning of wisdom; a good understanding have all those who do His commandments."** (Psalm 111:10) And again, why are wisdom and understanding so critical? **"Happy is the man who finds wisdom, and the man who gains understanding. For her proceeds are better than the profits of silver, and her gain than fine gold. She is more precious than rubies, and all the**

things you may desire cannot compare with her. Length of days is in her right hand; in her left hand riches and honor. Her ways are ways of pleasantness, and all her paths are peace. She is a tree of life to those who take hold of her, and happy are all who retain her.” (Proverbs 3:13-18) That’s quite a legacy, and it is within our power to bestow it upon our children—reverence toward Yahweh, leading to wisdom, leading in turn to something better than mere temporal wealth: happiness, long life (in the end, *eternal* life), true riches, honor, pleasantness (*no‘am*: grace, favor, kindness, delight, or beauty), peace, and abundant life. You can’t leave stuff like that to your kids in your will. You have to give it to them in person, or not at all.

- (900) *Be careful not to worship created things instead of their Creator. “Take heed, lest you lift your eyes to heaven, and when you see the sun, the moon, and the stars, all the host of heaven, you feel driven to worship them and serve them, which Yahweh your God has given to all the peoples under the whole heaven as a heritage. But Yahweh has taken you and brought you out of the iron furnace, out of Egypt, to be His people, an inheritance, as you are this day.”* (Deuteronomy 4:19-20) It is axiomatic that if you’re going to worship something, that “something” must logically be greater than you are. In fact, it only makes sense to reserve your worship for the *greatest thing* of which you can conceive—not the second or third greatest. Unfortunately, once mankind had, as a whole, turned its back on its Creator, the kind of insight that can only be gained through a personal relationship with Him—the kind enjoyed by Adam, Seth, Enoch, and Noah—was supplanted by mere human logic. At that point, God and man both had a problem. For man’s part, he was now equipped with a *neshamah* (the “breath of life” of Genesis 2:7) that enabled his soul to be made alive forever by the indwelling of the Spirit of God—but without which he was an incomplete and deficient being—spiritually empty. Mankind now had a thirst for God—a nagging consciousness of his unfulfilled, unborn spiritual state. He was compelled by his very nature to try to fill this “God-shaped vacuum.” He was *driven* to search for the very God he had chosen not to honor.

Yahweh too had a problem. His fundamental nature is Love, which as we have observed, cannot be forced upon its object without morphing into something else. He therefore couldn’t make His work, purpose, or even His presence, known in unambiguous terms to the intended object of His love—*us*—without robbing us of the ability and privilege of choosing to love Him, for such a choice implies and requires the option of *not* doing so. But He had already created us, which in turn had necessitated the creation of an infrastructure in which to maintain our organic life: earth, an oxygen-rich atmosphere, liquid water, a sun just the right size and

distance away to provide light and energy, and a large moon to drive tides, weather, and plate tectonics—all of which, and much more, are essential to our biosphere.

So here's the human race—fallen from the pure state and living in a world surrounded with really impressive big, bright, shiny things in the sky. The sun is the most obvious: it's heat and light bring life and security to our world. It's so critical to our survival, even a *caveman* could appreciate its importance. (Am I allowed to say that?) And the moon? Viewed from earth, it's *exactly* the same size as the sun, and though it's not as bright, it's far more interesting—disappearing and then magically reappearing in small increments every thirty days or so. The starry heavens too are fascinating and majestic, marching serenely across the night sky in pace with the seasons, forming pictures and suggesting stories in the minds of inquisitive men. The problem is that fallen man can't easily fathom anything greater than these, for the God who made them—Yahweh—doesn't force His presence and creative role into the forefront of our imaginations. And to make matters worse, until well into the twentieth century it was assumed that the sun, moon, and stars had *always* existed. The finite lifespan of the universe (about 14 billion years) wasn't scientifically established until Einstein's relativity, Hubble's red shifts, and Penzias' and Wilson's cosmic microwave background radiation had been thoroughly vindicated.

The idea of worshiping the sun, moon, and stars, then, isn't as crazy as it sounds to our jaded twenty-first century ears. It was what you might call an "understandable error." That's why Yahweh was careful to specifically point out that these things are not to be worshipped. They are merely created things, placed by God into our experience for our benefit—not only to sustain life on this planet, but also to teach us something about *His* glory. As David wrote, **"The heavens tell of the glory of God. The skies display his marvelous craftsmanship. Day after day they continue to speak; night after night they make him known. They speak without a sound or a word; their voice is silent in the skies; yet their message has gone out to all the earth, and their words to all the world. The sun lives in the heavens where God placed it. It bursts forth like a radiant bridegroom after his wedding. It rejoices like a great athlete eager to run the race. The sun rises at one end of the heavens and follows its course to the other end. Nothing can hide from its heat."** (Psalm 19:1-6 NLT)

- (901) *Be careful to remember Yahweh's covenant.* **"Furthermore Yahweh was angry with me [Moses] for your sakes, and swore that I would not cross over the Jordan, and that I would not enter the good land which Yahweh your God is giving you as an inheritance. But I must die in this land, I must not cross over the Jordan; but you**

shall cross over and possess that good land. Take heed to yourselves, lest you forget the covenant of Yahweh your God which He made with you, and make for yourselves a carved image in the form of anything which Yahweh your God has forbidden you. For Yahweh your God is a consuming fire, a jealous God.”

(Deuteronomy 4:21-24) Moses is saying, in effect, “You’re about to enter the Land of Promise, and I can’t go with you. But if you’ll heed the covenant Yahweh made with your fathers after they left Egypt, you’ll do just fine without me.”

A covenant is an agreement or contract between two parties, both of whom are expected to keep their end of the bargain. What were the terms of this “Mosaic” covenant? Let’s go back and review it: **“You have seen what I did to the Egyptians, and how I bore you on eagles’ wings and brought you to Myself. Now therefore, if you will indeed obey My voice and keep My covenant, then you shall be a special treasure to Me above all people; for all the earth is Mine. And you shall be to Me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.”** (Exodus 19:4-6) For the Israelites’ part, they were to “obey Yahweh’s voice.” The word translated “indeed obey” is the Hebrew verb *shama*: to hear, listen to, heed, or obey, with interest, attention, and understanding. That is, they were to carefully do as He instructed them through Moses, the heart of which is related in the very next chapter—the “Ten Commandments.”

Yahweh’s part of the bargain was three-fold—beyond what He’d already accomplished on behalf of Israel. First, He would consider Israel His “special treasure,” elevated in status and affection above all the peoples on the earth. The single Hebrew word translate “special treasure” is *segulla*, which actually means “personal property,” or “possession.” It is used of something especially valued by its owner, something for which he has extraordinary affection. Malachi fleshes out the idea: **“Then those who revered Yahweh spoke to one another, and Yahweh listened and heard them. So a book of remembrance was written before Him for those who fear Yahweh and who meditate on His name. ‘They shall be Mine,’ says Yahweh of hosts, ‘on the day that I make them My jewels [*segulla*]. And I will spare [Hebrew *chamal*: to have pity or compassion on, to show kindness to] them as a man spares his own son who serves him.”** (Malachi 3:16-17)

Second, Yahweh would make Israel a “kingdom of priests.” A kingdom, by definition, has a king—in this case, Yahweh Himself manifested in the flesh, the One we know as Yahshua the Messiah. A priest is one who intercedes for others, one who goes before God on behalf of mankind. So a “kingdom of priests” is a group who represent the world before God—the King—and also represent God to the world. The *ekklesia*—the “Church”—is described in deceptively similar terms: not a

*kingdom of priests*, but “*kings and priests*” (Revelation 1:6 and 5:10). Though our role as intercessors before King Yahshua will be the same as restored Israel’s, the members of the *ekklesia*, as resurrected, immortal, perfected beings, will function as co-regents with Christ during His Millennial Kingdom. The thought makes me blush, but that’s God’s plan.

Third, Israel would be a “holy nation.” That is, they would be set apart from the other nations as God’s “special people,” selected and consecrated for His glory and His purpose. Mere national survival—even against incredible odds and in the face of intense persecution—does not define Israel as a “holy nation” today. Only the recognition and acceptance of their Messiah, Yahshua of Nazareth, will declare that they at last have “obeyed Yahweh’s voice” and “kept His covenant.” As unlikely as it looks, that day is coming—and soon.

- (902) *Remember that blessing is contingent on obedience.* **“When you beget children and grandchildren and have grown old in the land, and act corruptly and make a carved image in the form of anything, and do evil in the sight of Yahweh your God to provoke Him to anger, I call heaven and earth to witness against you this day, that you will soon utterly perish from the land which you cross over the Jordan to possess; you will not prolong your days in it, but will be utterly destroyed.”** (Deuteronomy 4:25-26) There are two contrasting bodies of prophecy concerning the nation of Israel. There are unconditional promises that the Land will always belong to them and that their destiny as Yahweh’s people is secure. On the other hand, there are also scathing predictions and dire warnings of judgment and eviction from the Land in the wake of their disobedience of God’s Law. These may seem contradictory, since they predict diametrically opposite events, but they’re not. The first group of promises are predicated on Yahweh’s unchangeable character; the second on Israel’s behavior. Once again we see that only a God who transcends time—who can see the end and the beginning in the same view—could say with assurance that Israel *will* “act corruptly” and “perish from the land” but they will also be restored—if and when they repent. **“If My people who are called by My name will humble themselves, and pray and seek My face, and turn from their wicked ways, then I will hear from heaven, and will forgive their sin and heal their land.”** (II Chronicles 7:14)
- (903) *Recognize that good weather is an indicator of God’s approval.* **“It shall be that if you earnestly obey My commandments which I command you today, to love Yahweh your God and serve Him with all your heart and with all your soul, then I will give you the rain for your land in its season, the early rain and the latter rain, that you may gather in your grain, your new wine, and your oil. And I will send grass in your fields for your livestock, that you may eat and be filled.”** (Deuteronomy

11:13-15) The unsubstantiated opinion of atheist evolutionists notwithstanding, the data of science strongly suggest that our biosphere here on the earth balances on a razor's edge—indicating quite convincingly that an Intelligent Designer is behind it all. A small variation in any of a number of factors (for example, the strength of any of the four basic forces of nature—gravity, the weak and strong nuclear forces, and electromagnetism—the distance of earth from the sun, the mass of the moon, the percentage of oxygen in our atmosphere, etc.) would result in the impossibility of life as we know it existing here. Our governments spend billions on the search for extraterrestrial life, hoping against hope that they can find something with which to bolster their sagging atheistic presuppositions: *“Life is nothing but a lucky accident—there’s no need to acknowledge an Intelligent Creator, especially one with such inconvenient moral standards!”* And then they spend billions more on “disaster relief” when the weather goes haywire, destroying people’s lives and property.

Call me a cheapskate, but it seems to me we could save ourselves a lot of money and grief if we simply honored the God who *told us* that He would use weather as an indicator of how we were doing in His sight. Yes, the promises were made specifically to Israel (once a “land of milk and honey,” now a barren wasteland except where industrious Jews have wrested gardens from the recalcitrant soil through Herculean effort and unimaginable personal sacrifice), but I believe the principles apply to anyone who purports to follow God. Favorable weather, allowing material prosperity to follow in its wake, is a sign that we are in favor with Yahweh; whereas droughts, floods, destructive hurricanes, and earthquakes are signs that we may not be. What is the real issue here? Moses explains further: **“Take heed to yourselves, lest your heart be deceived, and you turn aside and serve other gods and worship them, lest Yahweh’s anger be aroused against you, and He shut up the heavens so that there be no rain, and the land yield no produce, and you perish quickly from the good land which Yahweh is giving you.”** (Deuteronomy 11:16-17) Disastrous weather is promised as a direct result of “turning aside and serving other gods.”

It is not without significance that “bad weather” (sent in response to the “serving” of false gods) is a sign of the coming of the last days—*before* Christ has returned for His ekklesia. **“Take heed that no one deceives you. For many will come in My name, saying, ‘I am the Christ,’ and will deceive many. And you will hear of wars and rumors of wars. See that you are not troubled; for all these things must come to pass, but the end is not yet. For nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom. And there will be famines, pestilences, and earthquakes in various places. All these are the beginning of sorrows.”** (Matthew 24:4-8) Famines, of course, are caused by droughts,

among other things. But notice also the warning about “earthquakes.” The Greek word is *seismos*, which according to scriptural usage includes not only earthquakes, but also “tempests,” i.e., violent storms (Matthew 8:24)—hurricanes, typhoons, tornadoes, tsunamis, and so forth. We can’t say we haven’t been warned.

- (904) *Remember how to reestablish fellowship with Yahweh.* **“And Yahweh will scatter you among the peoples, and you will be left few in number among the nations where Yahweh will drive you. And there you will serve gods, the work of men’s hands, wood and stone, which neither see nor hear nor eat nor smell. But from there you will seek Yahweh your God, and you will find Him if you seek Him with all your heart and with all your soul. When you are in distress and all these things come upon you, in the latter days when you turn to Yahweh your God and obey His voice (for Yahweh your God is a merciful God), He will not forsake you nor destroy you, nor forget the covenant of your fathers which He swore to them.”** (Deuteronomy 4:27-31) I found it distressing that Yahweh didn’t couch Israel’s apostasy in terms of “if,” but of “when.” He flatly said “You’re going to turn your back on Me.” But He also unequivocally declared that they would come back to Him “in the latter days.” When they (or any of us, really) find themselves in distress, suffering the consequences of having turned their backs on Yahweh, there are simple, profound instructions here for obtaining His mercy: **“Turn to Yahweh your God and obey His voice.... Seek Him with all your heart and with all your soul.”**

The rabbis, of course, would insist that they never left Him. But to hold this opinion is to call Yahweh a liar, for the Jews *are* “scattered among the peoples.” They *are* “few in number.” And even now that Yahweh has resurrected their political presence in the Land, the vast majority of Israelis living there are either agnostics or atheists—they *do* serve “other gods” that have no life. What will it take to compel Israel to “seek Yahweh their God with all their heart and soul?” Disaster, I’m afraid—a war worthy of Tolkien’s epic saga of good against evil in Middle Earth. With their backs to the Wailing Wall, Israel will witness Yahweh’s miraculous defeat of the world’s combined Muslim armies, determined to once and for all drive them into the sea. The story is recounted in all its gory detail in Ezekiel 38 and 39. The bottom line is, **“So the house of Israel shall know that I am Yahweh their God from that day forward.”** (Ezekiel 39:22) Better late than never.

- (905) *Note that Yahweh has never led you astray in the past.* **“Every commandment which I command you today you must be careful to observe, that you may live and multiply, and go in and possess the land of which Yahweh swore to your fathers. And you shall remember that Yahweh your God led you all the way**

**these forty years in the wilderness, to humble you and test you, to know what was in your heart, whether you would keep His commandments or not.”**

(Deuteronomy 8:1-2) Even though the Israelites were no longer oppressed slaves in Egypt, no one would suggest that their wilderness wanderings were a picnic. Besides the material inconveniences, their life during that time was one continual test. Sometimes they passed with flying colors; other times they failed miserably (just like us). So as graduation day approaches, Moses reminds them that it wasn't him who led them all these years—it was God Himself. Yahweh told them where to go and when to stop. Yahweh fed them and gave them water to drink. And Yahweh gave them a priesthood and tabernacle that would explain, if they would but open their eyes, how He planned to provide salvation to the whole world—using them as a vehicle. They had left Egypt a contentious, ignorant rabble. They would enter the Promised Land a dedicated, disciplined army, empowered and enlightened personally by the One True God. Moses didn't reserve one iota of credit for himself. To the very end, he simply pleaded with his people to heed the commandments of Yahweh.

Moses later continued the theme. **“He is your praise [that is, the One in whom you can rightfully boast], and He is your God, who has done for you these great and awesome things which your eyes have seen. Your fathers went down to Egypt with seventy persons, and now Yahweh your God has made you as the stars of heaven in multitude. Therefore you shall love Yahweh your God, and keep His charge, His statutes, His judgments, and His commandments always.”**

(Deuteronomy 10:21-22, 11:1) This is one more restatement of the agreement, the covenant, that existed between Yahweh and Israel. Moses' point here is that Yahweh had, here at the end of the wilderness wanderings, followed through on his end of the bargain at every turn. The Israelites were about to get their first real opportunity to demonstrate their commitment to keeping up their part, as they prepared to cross over the Jordan into the Promised Land (read: “begin living the day-to-day life of a believer”). Yahweh doesn't ask us to love or obey Him without giving us ample—actually, *overwhelming*—reasons for doing so. He demonstrated His love for us long before He invited us to reciprocate.

- (906) *Observe that trials are there to teach us lessons.* **“So He humbled you, allowed you to hunger, and fed you with manna which you did not know nor did your fathers know, that He might make you know that man shall not live by bread alone; but man lives by every word that proceeds from the mouth of Yahweh. Your garments did not wear out on you, nor did your foot swell these forty years. You should know in your heart that as a man chastens his son, so Yahweh your God chastens you.”** (Deuteronomy 8:3-5) Point number one: a lesson isn't worth much if it doesn't make an impact on our lives. A drunk driver who is

merely told by the officer who pulls him over, “Please don’t do that any more” is far less likely to change his ways than the one who loses his driving privilege for six months. Saul of Tarsus needed to be struck blind for three days before he could hear the call of Yahweh on his life. Pain tells us to remove our hand from the hot skillet before we seriously injure ourselves. The sad fact is that the most effective lessons often involve a little discomfort. At the very least, they shake us out of our complacency. These lessons are a gift from God, like the manna in the wilderness—something we desperately need, even if they’re as unfamiliar as they are timely. Yahweh, who loves us, is perfectly willing to make us “uncomfortable” in the interests of teaching us His ways, for His ways lead to life, health, and happiness.

I have eleven children, and when necessary as they were growing up, I disciplined them. But I never chastised the neighbors’ kids (even if they obviously needed it). Point number two: God doesn’t expend breath teaching other people’s children—only his own. I know it seldom feels like it at the time, but that should be a great comfort to us: when “bad things” happen to a child of God, we can rest assured that there’s always something valuable He intends to teach us through the experience—something he wants us to learn and remember, something that will make us (or those who know us) better people. When similar “bad things” happen to people who do not wish to call Yahweh their Father, these things are merely the result of living in a fallen world, the natural consequences of sin, whether their own or someone else’s. I realize it sounds counterintuitive, not to mention being so conveniently nebulous it can’t be disproved. But remember the conundrum of love: Yahweh can’t bribe us with blessings or threaten us with cursings in order to gain our love. Only after our love has been freely given to Him do His blessings and chastisements become effective in guiding our paths.

Point number three, then, is that the trials that fall into our lives are there for our benefit. The very first thing James wrote about in his epistle was, **“My brethren, count it all joy when you fall into various trials, knowing that the testing of your faith produces patience. But let patience have its perfect work, that you may be mature and complete, lacking nothing.”** (James 1:2-4) Peter too reminds us that this “testing of our faith” can lead to all sorts of profitable results: **“Add to your faith virtue, to virtue knowledge, to knowledge self-control, to self-control perseverance, to perseverance godliness, to godliness brotherly kindness, and to brotherly kindness, love. For if these things are yours and abound, you will be neither barren nor unfruitful in the knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ.”** (II Peter 1:5-8)

(907) *Know that when we keep Yahweh's commandments, He will provide for all of our needs.* **"Therefore you shall keep the commandments of Yahweh your God, to walk in His ways and to fear Him. For Yahweh your God is bringing you into a good land, a land of brooks of water, of fountains and springs, that flow out of valleys and hills; a land of wheat and barley, of vines and fig trees and pomegranates, a land of olive oil and honey; a land in which you will eat bread without scarcity, in which you will lack nothing; a land whose stones are iron and out of whose hills you can dig copper."** (Deuteronomy 8:6-9) Back in Precept #903, we were reminded that the rainfall that had made the Promised Land perennially lush and fertile was henceforth to be contingent upon the Israelites' obedience to the commandments of Yahweh. Here we see the same truth presented in slightly different terms. God says, in effect, *Because I have prepared this good and productive land for you to live in—a land you didn't have to work for, develop, or purchase—you are to revere Me and follow my instructions.* The pattern never changes: Yahweh first created us, loved us, provided for our needs, and set us free from bondage. In response, we are to acknowledge His authority and reciprocate His love. We are never asked to exercise "blind faith" in God's word (and we're specifically *prohibited* from blindly following what men tell us). We are merely invited to open our eyes (eyes *He gave us*, by the way), recognize His great goodness toward us, and respond accordingly. In reality, Yahweh is asking for little more than good manners from us. He has given us the world, and all He wants is a thank-you note.

But what do we do? All too often, we see the good land before us and assume we're entitled to it. We credit good luck or our own strength when we win battles (though we still curse God when we lose). We refuse to see His provision, and instead invent myths honoring "chance" and "destiny" and "valor." We leverage our meager successes in order to subjugate our brothers, and then we congratulate ourselves for "outgrowing our dependence on God." And we wonder why the rains cease, the trees wither, and the topsoil blows away. Compare the description of the "good land" Yahweh deeded to Israel, described above, to the barren wasteland to which they began returning in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Therein lies the difference between honoring Yahweh and serving "other gods."

(908) *Observe that the choice between prosperity and death is ours to make.* **"You shall remember Yahweh your God, for it is He who gives you power to get wealth, that He may establish His covenant which He swore to your fathers, as it is this day. Then it shall be, if you by any means forget Yahweh your God, and follow other gods, and serve them and worship them, I testify against you this day that you shall surely perish. As the nations which Yahweh destroys before you, so you shall perish, because you would not be obedient to the voice of Yahweh your God."**

(Deuteronomy 8:18-20) As if he hadn't already made his point, Moses says it again. *You are a covenant people. Honor the covenant you've made with Yahweh and you will be blessed as a result. Or serve other gods instead, as the nations around you do, and perish.* The destruction he speaks of is a national phenomenon: Israel's political existence within the Land depends upon their national observance of their covenant with Yahweh. Of course, the people to whom Moses was preaching were intimately familiar with the power and provision of their God. They'd lived in its shadow, quite literally, all their lives. But Moses points out where they would run afoul of the commandment: they would *forget*. Their national memory would be lulled to sleep by the background noise of business as usual in the Land. To the generation that crossed the Jordan, the exodus from Egypt was the stuff of bedtime stories; to their children, ancient legend, and to *their* children, misty half-forgotten myth.

“Remembering Yahweh” was built into the Law. The Torah is peppered from one end to the other with devices great and small designed to prevent Israel from forgetting. Wearing the tzeit, resting on the Sabbath, writing God's Instructions on the doorposts of your house, tithing, observing new moon celebrations, congregating three times a year in a central location to bring sacrifices and rejoice before Yahweh—all these things and more were designed to keep Yahweh's persona constantly before Israel. In the theocracy of early Israel, it would have been really hard to forget about Yahweh by accident. You'd have to purposely ignore Him, for evidence of His provision was everywhere you looked.

(909) *Never assume the good things in your life are there because you deserve them. “Do not think in your heart, after Yahweh your God has cast them out before you, saying, ‘Because of my righteousness Yahweh has brought me in to possess this land’; but it is because of the wickedness of these nations that Yahweh is driving them out from before you.”* (Deuteronomy 9:4) When we find ourselves blessed by God, there are several logical ways to respond, and they're not all correct. We could say, “*Of course* I'm being blessed. I'm better than my neighbor, more moral, upright, and religious. God must be very happy to have me on His team.” Don't be too sure. The Pharisees of Yahshua's day enjoyed the same sort of prosperity and displayed the same sort of pride—and God was furious with them for their hypocrisy.

We could say, “These good things I'm enjoying are merely the result of following God's Law. After all, He said that if I walked in His statutes and kept His commandments, He would give me fair weather, bountiful harvests, peace, security, and prosperity. So since life is pretty good, I must be doing everything right.” While it's true that keeping Yahweh's

commandments can be expected to have certain “natural” consequences that benefit us, we should not mistake the prosperity we gain by living “godly” lives for a relationship with the God who pointed these things out to us. This was the actual source of the Pharisees’ general state of prosperity—nobody kept the letter of the Law more rigorously than they did. Today, we see the same sort of phenomenon. Mormons, for example, are often statistically more prosperous than their neighbors. Why? Because their religion tells them to work hard, live clean, and behave themselves. But the “blessings” they enjoy are not specially bestowed upon them by Yahweh. They are, rather, the result of “natural law.” They’re “blessed” for pretty much the same reason that Amish people don’t die in high speed car crashes.

Thus we observe that Israel wasn’t given the Promised Land because they had the Torah—and certainly not because they kept it. Their possession of the Land was based on only one thing: Yahweh chose to give it to them—centuries before the Canaanite inhabitants had earned themselves a one way ticket to oblivion. So Yahweh warns them in this Precept not to start “believing their own press.” It is not because they were especially good, but because the Canaanites were particularly bad, that the Land was changing hands. The underlying truth was that if Israel became as bad as the former tenants, they too would be evicted. What, then, was the proper response to having been blessed with possession of this good land? They should have said, “Thank you, Father Yahweh. Though we have done nothing to deserve this, we will endeavor to become worthy of your goodness by observing your statutes, keeping your commandments, and teaching our children to honor you as well. Please help us!”

- (910) *Remember what makes God angry.* **“Remember! Do not forget how you provoked Yahweh your God to wrath in the wilderness. From the day that you departed from the land of Egypt until you came to this place, you have been rebellious against Yahweh. Also in Horeb you provoked Yahweh to wrath, so that Yahweh was angry enough with you to have destroyed you.”** (Deuteronomy 9:7-8) Learning from experience is a two way street. Not only should we take notice of our blessings and consider their source, but we should also remember the “bad things,” those times when we “provoked Yahweh our God to wrath” and lived to tell the tale. If we bear in mind what has angered God in the past, we’ll naturally be more careful about repeating those same stupid mistakes in the future. Yahweh is not unreasonable: He has told us what He wants us to do. God went to a lot of trouble to inform us of His Instructions. Moses reports, **“When I went up into the mountain to receive the tablets of stone, the tablets of the covenant which Yahweh made with you, then I stayed on the mountain forty days and forty nights. I neither ate bread**

nor drank water. Then Yahweh delivered to me two tablets of stone written with the finger of God, and on them were all the words which Yahweh had spoken to you on the mountain from the midst of the fire in the day of the assembly. And it came to pass, at the end of forty days and forty nights, that Yahweh gave me the two tablets of stone, the tablets of the covenant.” (Deuteronomy 9:9-11) Can you blame Him for being angry when we don’t even *try* to keep His commandments?

These lessons are not just for Israel. They’re for anyone who purports to honor Yahweh—and they apply on a national as well as a personal level. Picture Yahweh as your Father. Although He may offer *advice* to the other neighborhood kids, He exercises *authority* over you—a very different thing. Because you are His own child, He both blesses and disciplines you, but he does neither of these things to other people’s children (in His role as our Father, that is. He will soon assume a different role—that of King—and things will change a bit). My point is that in a life (whether individual or national) that professes to honor Yahweh, the things that happen, whether good or bad, should be viewed as having been ordained by God. They may (or may not) be the direct result of our actions, but they are definitely the result of our relationship.

A contemporary example of how this all works was chronicled by journalist William Koenig in his book *Eye To Eye—Facing the Consequences of Dividing Israel*. He lists scores of instances during the Clinton and Bush years that linked America’s official attempts to betray Israel to the Palestinians to devastating consequences on our own soil, suffered by our own people—fires, floods, hurricanes, tornadoes, and terrorist attacks—all of which happened within 48 hours of our attempts to plunder Israel in the name of “peace.” But what were Yahweh’s clear instructions on the matter? He had told Abraham, “I will bless those who bless you, and I will curse him who curses you.” (Genesis 12:3) He revealed through Isaiah, “Then behold, at eventide, trouble! And before the morning, he is no more. This is the portion of those who plunder us, and the lot of those who rob us.” (Isaiah 17:14) And finally, “It shall be in that day that I will seek to destroy all the nations that come against Jerusalem.” (Zechariah 12:9) We Americans have “provoked Yahweh to wrath.” We have rebelled against Him and plundered His chosen people. Call me politically naïve, but it seems to me we ought to stop doing what angers God and start doing what pleases Him.

- (911) *Know that your actions can affect future generations, not just yourself. “Observe and obey all these words which I command you, that it may go well with you and your children after you forever, when you do what is good and right in the sight of Yahweh your God.” (Deuteronomy 12:28) This is a corollary to Precept #899. Forget for a moment about “morality,” “doing the right*

thing” and “following your inner compass.” The most visceral, primeval reason for following Yahweh’s instructions is that if you do, “it will go well with you.” And even if you’re so other-worldly that you don’t care about what happens to yourself (which is really stupid, since God told us to love our neighbors as we do *ourselves*), then think about the consequences that will fall upon your children: they too will reap temporal benefits from your spiritual obedience.

It may come as a shock to some devout believers: God encourages us to obey Him not solely out of pious duty or religious obligation, but out of sheer self-interest. He *wants it* to “go well with us.” The same God who told us to worship Him alone, rest on the Sabbath day, and refrain from disrespect, murder, theft, adultery, perjury, and covetousness also commanded us to *rejoice*. We must try to understand that everything Yahweh commanded us to do is *good for us*—even the stuff we don’t quite understand. If there’s no direct and obvious benefit associated with a precept, then the benefit is indirect and obscure—but it’s always *there*.

I realize that we all have a rebellious streak a mile wide. We hate being told what to do. If I take cold medicine, I suddenly get this irresistible urge to go out and operate heavy machinery, simply because the instructions have told me not to. If Yahweh’s one and only commandment had been, “Thou shalt not hit thy thumb with a ball peen hammer,” I can practically guarantee that within a generation, a cult would have arisen whose sole purpose would be finding ways to “get around” this onerous burden. We’d be smashing our thumbs with rubber mallets or in door jambs, or going for our pinky fingers, or shattering other people’s thumbs. We would be engaging in heated theological debates about whether only the ball peen end of the hammer head was meant, but not the flat side, or whether it might be permissible to whack your thumb with the handle. One group would be advocating outlawing hammers altogether. Another would conclude that thumbs were so holy, it was a sin to let them be seen in public. We’d do *anything* to “keep the law” while rebelling against its Author. Who among us would comprehend that because the Lawgiver loved us, He simply wanted to keep us, and our children, free from pain?

- (912) *Be careful not to be influenced by what you’re fighting.* “When Yahweh your God cuts off from before you the nations which you go to dispossess, and you displace them and dwell in their land, take heed to yourself that you are not ensnared to follow them, after they are destroyed from before you, and that you do not inquire after their gods, saying, ‘How did these nations serve their gods? I also will do likewise.’ You shall not worship Yahweh your God in that way; for every

**abomination to Yahweh which He hates they have done to their gods; for they burn even their sons and daughters in the fire to their gods.”** (Deuteronomy 12:29-31) Yahweh made it relatively easy to distinguish between worshipping Him and practicing the rites of the Canaanites. There was no overlap at all. The Canaanites had temples, shrines, and worship groves all over the place; Yahweh directed them to formally worship only “in the place where He chose to make His name abide.” The worshippers of Ba’al, Molech, Chemosh, Dagon, and Asthoreth, etc. bowed before idols representing their gods; Yahweh strictly forbade the making of images—even of Himself—for worship. The temples of Canaan’s false gods were as large and impressive as their devotees could manage to build; Yahweh’s “house” was a small, gray, nondescript portable structure surrounded by a flimsy linen fence—they wouldn’t have a “real” temple for almost half a millennium. It was as if Yahweh was telling Israel, “You don’t need all the props, the hype, and the impressive infrastructure. You’ve got Me, and though I’m Spirit, I Am *real*—unlike all these pitiful counterfeits you see being worshipped in the Land.

The lesson of this precept is largely lost on the Church in today’s world. All too often, we employ psychology in place of the simplicity of the Gospel; we measure success by counting noses (or worse, dollars) instead of reaching hearts; we use Madison Avenue marketing techniques instead of the seeming foolishness of preaching the unabashed truth. In short, we “inquire after the gods of the land,” and say to ourselves, “How does the world achieve its goals? I will do likewise.” We have been warned not to do this.

- (913) *Neither ignore God nor “put words in His mouth.” “Whatever I command you, be careful to observe it; you shall not add to it nor take away from it.”* (Deuteronomy 12:32) Neither Israel nor the Church have a very good track record in their “care” in observing Yahweh’s commandments. Speaking in broad generalities, the Jewish approach has traditionally been to “add to it,” that is, to place a hedge about God’s word with layer upon layer of insulation, explanation, and interpretation—until the truth is buried so deep it can no longer be detected or discerned.

The classic Christian pitfall, on the other hand, is to “take away from it,” to remove from our daily experience everything we don’t understand (or don’t *want to* understand) and don’t have the maturity or courage to honestly explore. That could include anything beyond the bare-bones doctrine of our salvation: the “hard sayings” and inconvenient commandments of Christ, the prophetic texts of the Old and New Covenant Scriptures, and the Torah—*especially* the Torah. Perhaps the

most blatant example of this approach is the famous “Jefferson Bible,” in which our third President unabashedly edited Yahweh’s scriptures down to forty-six pages of platitudes with which he was prepared to agree, leaving nothing miraculous, nothing divine. Explaining his project in a letter to John Adams in 1813, Jefferson wrote, “We must reduce our volume to the simple evangelists, select, even from them, the very words only of Jesus, paring off the amphibologisms [ambiguous declarations] into which they have been led, by forgetting often, or not understanding, what had fallen from him, by giving their own misconceptions as his dicta, and expressing unintelligibly for others what they had not understood themselves. There will be found remaining the most sublime and benevolent code of morals which has ever been offered to man. I have performed this operation for my own use, by cutting verse by verse out of the printed book, and arranging the matter which is evidently his, and which is as easily distinguishable as diamonds in a dunghill.” I don’t know, Tom. Unlike you, I haven’t exactly found the *other* 1,271 pages of God’s Word a “dunghill.” By taking away from the Bible Yahweh’s commandment *not to* “take away from it,” Jefferson (and so many others) have merely demonstrated their own arrogance and ignorance.

But I’m preaching to the choir, am I not? By now you surely know that the Torah is absolutely consistent with the New Covenant texts (including both TJ’s “diamonds” and his “dunghill”), and if you’ve read my previous work, *Future History*, you know that the New and Old Testament prophetic passages are in perfect sync as well, if you have the chronology straight. It is not without significance that the Bible closes (almost) with a virtual restatement of this precept’s principle, this time enumerating the dire consequences for refusing to comply: **“For I testify to everyone who hears the words of the prophecy of this book: If anyone adds to these things, God will add to him the plagues that are written in this book; and if anyone takes away from the words of the book of this prophecy, God shall take away his part from the Book of Life, from the holy city, and from the things which are written in this book. He who testifies to these things says, ‘Surely I am coming quickly.’”** (Revelation 22:18-20) If you find yourself purposely obfuscating or denying God’s truth, there is still time to repent—but not much.

- (914) *Don’t be afraid of Yahweh’s adversaries.* **“If you should say in your heart, ‘These nations are greater than I; how can I dispossess them?’—you shall not be afraid of them, but you shall remember well what Yahweh your God did to Pharaoh and to all Egypt: the great trials which your eyes saw, the signs and the wonders, the mighty hand and the outstretched arm, by which Yahweh your God brought you out. So shall Yahweh your God do to all the peoples of whom you are afraid. Moreover Yahweh your God will send the hornet among them until those who are**

**left, who hide themselves from you, are destroyed.”** (Deuteronomy 7:17-20)

The Israelites may have been surrounded by God’s enemies, but they are not alone in this respect. In these Last Days, the Called-Out of Christ too find themselves surrounded like Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid by hostile and aggressive foes. But as with Israel, to ask ourselves, “How can I dispossess them?” is to ask the wrong question. Overcoming Yahweh’s antagonists is not our job. He will take care of it, and what’s more, He has already told us how He will do it. No, our task is to preach the “foolishness” of the Good News to the world, feed Yahshua’s “sheep,” love our God, and love each other as we do ourselves.

But what about the enemies that beset us, depicting truth as lies and presenting lies as established fact, declaring Yahweh “dead” (or worse, redefining Him as being the same as somebody else’s false deity), ridiculing our scriptures and faith, and threatening our rights, freedoms, and even (gasp!) our standard of living? Yahweh’s instructions are quite clear: **“You shall not be afraid of them, but you shall remember well what Yahweh your God did to Pharaoh.”** As bad as things are (or promise to get), Christians today will likely never face a situation bleaker than what Israel labored under just prior to the exodus—slavery, despair, and the hopelessness of having forgotten the promises of God. The Church under overt persecution—the “Smyrna” of Revelation 2:8-11—though still suffering here and there in our world, is no longer *characteristic* of our age, although they were given virtually the same commandment our current Precept offers: **“Do not fear any of those things which you are about to suffer.”** (Revelation 2:10) The Church that defines our current state is that of Philadelphia, who were told, **“See, I have set before you and open door, and no one can shut it; for you have a little strength, have kept My word, and have not denied My name.”** (Revelation 3:8) Here the risen Christ is informing us as to *why* we need not be afraid, and the answer is the same as it’s always been: Yahweh is fighting our battles for us. This fact may not be quite as blatantly obvious as it was when Yahweh brought Pharaoh to his knees (if not his senses), but the days of the “mighty hand and outstretched arm” of Yahweh are about to visibly return. In the meantime, we are *commanded* not to be afraid of God’s enemies.

- (915) *Endeavor to be the tool in Yahweh’s hand.* **“Yahweh your God will drive out those nations before you little by little; you will be unable to destroy them at once, lest the beasts of the field become too numerous for you. But Yahweh your God will deliver them over to you, and will inflict defeat upon them until they are destroyed. And He will deliver their kings into your hand, and you will destroy their name from under heaven; no one shall be able to stand against you until you have destroyed them.”** (Deuteronomy 7:22-24) The days of military conquest in the name

of Yahweh were confined to a finite list of national adversaries (see Mitzvot #352, #353, #601, #602, and #918) a long time ago. But that doesn't mean the lessons inherent in God's instructions for the conquest of Canaan have been abrogated. The principle is still valid: Yahweh often chooses to fulfill His purposes through the agency of men. The reason, of course, is that His *direct* action would leave little or no room for free will in our response—we would be obligated to adore Him, leading to the conundrum of which we spoke earlier: love compelled is not love at all. Interestingly, Yahweh's human agents needn't even be of the "believing" variety. The rod of God's correction is often seen wielded by pagan monarchs like Nebuchadnezzar, whom Yahweh called "My servant" in Jeremiah 25:9. And consider this: Adolph Hitler did more to give the Jews their own homeland and state than any other man in modern history.

That being said, I believe the highest honor to which a believer can aspire in this life is to be a tool in the hand of Yahweh. As Uncle Mordecai reminded Esther, **"If you remain completely silent at this time, relief and deliverance will arise for the Jews from another place, but you and your father's house will perish. Yet who knows whether you have come to the kingdom for such a time as this?"** (Esther 4:14) In other words, if we don't fulfill the destiny Yahweh has prepared for us, He will simply bestow our privileges of service onto someone more willing. As Mordecai pointed out, the power needed to achieve God's goals remains in His hands anyway. We merely have to be willing to walk in that strength. I know it seems counterintuitive, but if we're willing to pick up His shovel, He'll hand us the keys to His back hoe. Even with all that power available to us, however, Yahweh cautions us that He won't achieve more than we're willing to attempt. He wants us to walk *together* through this world, side by side. We are neither to lag behind nor race ahead of Him. Of course, Yahweh could, if He chose to do so, accomplish all of His goals in the blink of an eye. But like any doting Father teaching His children, He condescends to our inadequacies: the "result" He's *really* after is fellowship with us. So in this life, the work we do in Yahweh's power will get done at man's pace, not God's. If we'll offer to drain the swamp for Him, He won't let us find ourselves up to our aspirations in alligators.

- (916) *Show your reverence for Yahweh through your love, obedience, and service.* **"And now, Israel, what does Yahweh your God require of you, but to fear Yahweh your God, to walk in all His ways and to love Him, to serve Yahweh your God with all your heart and with all your soul, and to keep the commandments of Yahweh and His statutes which I command you today for your good? Indeed heaven and the highest heavens belong to Yahweh your God, also the earth with all that is in it. Yahweh delighted only in your fathers, to love them; and He chose their**

**descendants after them, you above all peoples, as it is this day. Therefore circumcise the foreskin of your heart, and be stiff-necked no longer.”**

(Deuteronomy 10:12-16) Lest there should be any confusion on the matter, Moses here flatly states that all these things we’ve been talking about: reverence for God, righteousness, love, service, and obedience are not merely suggestions or recommendations—they’re requirements! He reminds them that Yahweh’s love for, and delight in, their forefathers, beginning with Abraham, resulted in His choosing Israel, out of every nation on earth, to be His covenant people. That gave them astounding privileges, but also serious responsibilities. They were, in short, to be the people through whom Yahweh’s promise to Abraham would be kept: **“In you all the families of the earth shall be blessed.”** (Genesis 12:3)

With the benefit of 20/20 hindsight, we can see today that that promise was fulfilled in the advent and sacrifice of Yahshua the Messiah—though many Jews, still characterized by an “uncircumcised” attitude and “stiff neck,” refuse to believe it. But if, as I have been insisting, the Torah looks forward to Christ in every symbol, rite, and precept, then “revering Yahweh, walking in His ways, loving, serving, and obeying Him” are all tantamount to embracing Yahshua as the promised Messiah. These requirements cannot be met by half-heartedly and imperfectly following a contrived list of 613 regulations cherry-picked from the Torah—half of them altered beyond recognition by self-serving rabbis.

Since these things are “required” specifically of Israel, does that mean mankind in general is held to a lower standard? Not really. The prophet Micah explains what God wants from the rest of us: **“He has shown you, O man, what is good; and what does Yahweh require of you, but to do justly, to love mercy, and to walk humbly with your God?”** (Micah 6:8) In intuitively practical, albeit less specific, terms than those given above, this “list” boils down to the same thing. The key, of course, is “walking humbly with our God.” If we are walking *with* Him (not against, in front of, or behind Him) in humility (i.e., realistically assessing our relationship, not arrogantly replacing His truth with our own concepts), then justice, mercy, and all the rest will naturally tend to fall in line.

- (917) *Appreciate the unique nature of the Promised Land.* **“Therefore you shall keep every commandment which I command you today, that you may be strong, and go in and possess the land which you cross over to possess, and that you may prolong your days in the land which Yahweh swore to give your fathers, to them and their descendants, ‘a land flowing with milk and honey.’”** (Deuteronomy 11:8-9) This is but one of many places in the Torah where the possession of the Land is seen as being contingent upon keeping Yahweh’s commandments.

Note that Moses didn't say "some of them" but "*every* commandment" God has made. Now that we have seen most of them, it is readily apparent that quite a few of these precepts—especially the overtly symbolic ones, those having to do with Yahweh's seven annual convocations, the tabernacle, sacrifices, or the priesthood—could *only* be kept in the Land. It was, in fact, *illegal* to "keep" them in any location other than "where Yahweh your God chooses to make His name abide." So Yahweh was actually telling Israel, "If you *won't* worship Me, I'll arrange it so that you *can't* worship Me." Seems to me, that lesson still applies—to all of us.

It's helpful to remember that at the time of the exodus, the climate of the Land of Promise was very different from what it is today. **"For the land which you go to possess is not like the land of Egypt from which you have come, where you sowed your seed and watered it by foot, as a vegetable garden; but the land which you cross over to possess is a land of hills and valleys, which drinks water from the rain of heaven, a land for which Yahweh your God cares; the eyes of Yahweh your God are always on it, from the beginning of the year to the very end of the year."** (Deuteronomy 11:10-12) Even this is symbolic of Yahweh's redemption. The land they had left, while prosperous enough, required lots of labor, in addition to the provision of God's predictable seasonal weather and the annual flooding of the Nile. Yes, with irrigation and manpower, you could coax a decent living from Egyptian soil, and they did just that for millennia. But Canaan was different. At that point in history, the prevailing west winds constantly blew moisture from the Mediterranean over the Land. (They still would, if Yahweh wasn't so displeased with the sons of Abraham who live there.) The clouds would pile up against the hills, precipitating their precious cargo over the costal plain—much like the weather pattern we normally see in Washington State and Oregon. Behind this range lies the Jordan Valley—all of which is hundreds of feet below sea level—and beyond that, desert.

If "Egypt" represents living in the world, and "the Land" symbolizes walking through life as Yahweh's children, then the climatic differences between the two places illustrate the dichotomy between our old life and our new one. We have moved from being dependent on our own never-ending labor to being reliant upon Yahweh's provision—not just for our daily bread, but for our very spiritual existence. Don't lose sight of what introduced us to this concept. Our possession of the "Land" (the blessed life of a believer) is contingent upon our observation of Yahweh's commandments—which, as I've noted 'til I'm blue in the face, all point unequivocally to our grace and cleansing provided by Yahweh through the life and sacrifice of His Messiah, Yahshua of Nazareth. The bottom line:

*believe* God, and it will be counted unto you as righteousness. (Gee, that sounds sort of familiar, doesn't it?)

- (918) *Expect victory if you love Yahweh and obey Him.* “If you carefully keep all these commandments which I command you to do—to love Yahweh your God, to walk in all His ways, and to hold fast to Him—then Yahweh will drive out all these nations from before you, and you will dispossess greater and mightier nations than yourselves. Every place on which the sole of your foot treads shall be yours: from the wilderness and Lebanon, from the river, the River Euphrates, even to the Western Sea, shall be your territory. No man shall be able to stand against you; Yahweh your God will put the dread of you and the fear of you upon all the land where you tread, just as He has said to you.” (Deuteronomy 11:22-25) We’ve already identified who these “great and mighty” nations were. To reprise the list, “When Yahweh your God brings you into the land which you go to possess, and has cast out many nations before you, the Hittites and the Girgashites and the Amorites and the Canaanites and the Perizzites and the Hivites and the Jebusites, seven nations greater and mightier than you, and when Yahweh your God delivers them over to you, you shall conquer them and utterly destroy them.” (Deuteronomy 7:1-2) What we haven’t done (yet) is to figure out what they represent from a symbolic point of view. These are things we will encounter *in the Land*—that is, as we endeavor to walk in Yahweh’s grace. He promises to “drive them out from before us,” but only if we’ll “walk in all His ways and hold fast to Him.” So, who are these bad boys?

(1) The Hittites are the sons of Heth, a Canaanite tribe. “Heth” means “terror,” so Yahweh is saying we need not be afraid.

(2) The Girgashites are also descendants of Canaan. The name means “dwelling on a clayey soil.” I can relate to that, living in Central Virginia. “Clayey” soil is nutrient-poor, unproductive, and hard as a rock, like the “stony places” in the parable of the sower in Matthew 13:5-6. Where the seed couldn’t grow deep roots, it withered and died. Yahweh, then, is telling us we can be productive and fruitful.

(3) The Amorites’ name is derived from the verb *amar*, meaning “to say, speak, command, boast, or avow.” I believe Yahweh is saying we can “dispossess” empty speech, that is, we will be able to discern fact from fiction, truth from lies, even as those around us are being deceived.

(4) The Canaanites were descended from the son of Ham who was cursed by Noah in Genesis 9:20-25. The name is derived from the primitive verb *kana*, meaning “to be humbled, subdued, or made low.” Yahweh is telling us that His enemies will never succeed in bringing us down. We are reminded of Peter’s declaration that Yahshua was “the Messiah, the Son of the Living God,” upon which truth Yahshua promised

to build his called-out assembly, against whom “the gates of Hell would not prevail.” (See Matthew 16:18.)

(5) The Perizzites’ name is derived from *paraziy*, meaning one who dwells in a village, hamlet, rural setting, or in the open country—that is, one who lives unprotected by a city wall. God will never leave us unprotected.

(6) The Hivites at first seem to mean something similar to the Perizzites. It means “villagers,” from a word, *chavvah*, meaning “a village, town or tent-village.” But notice that Chavvah (spelled and pronounced the same way) is also the name of the person we usually call “Eve,” as in Adam’s wife, the one who was first deceived by Satan. Could it be that Yahweh was telling us that we will no longer be deceived into sin if we will keep His commandments? Sounds good to me.

(7) The Jebusites were another Canaanite tribe, named for Jebus, from a verb (*bus*) meaning to tread down, trample, reject, or desecrate. Yahweh is once again reminding us that no one will tread His children underfoot if they’ll keep His precepts.

#### BLESSING AND CURSING

- (919) *Choose between the blessing and the curse.* **“Behold, I set before you today a blessing and a curse: the blessing, if you obey the commandments of Yahweh your God which I command you today; and the curse, if you do not obey the commandments of Yahweh your God, but turn aside from the way which I command you today, to go after other gods which you have not known.”**

(Deuteronomy 11:26-28) Choice is the exercise of the privileged. In my neighborhood, we can choose between twenty brands of coffee, thirty-five kinds of breakfast cereal, and about eighty different varieties of cheese. Paper or plastic. Regular or high-test. Windows or Mac. Some places in the world, the choice is between scrounging through the city dump and going hungry. But seldom is the choice this clear cut, this blatantly obvious as to which option we should choose. Let’s see, live or die, blessing or curse? Gee, that’s a tough one.

Here’s the tricky part in today’s world. The purveyors of modern Babylon—in the guise of politics, commerce, and religion, often offer choices that aren’t really choices at all. *Would you like the red curse, or the blue curse? It’s your choice.* Only Yahweh offers us a real choice: obey His commandments and live in blessing, or disobey them and bring the curse of estrangement from Him to your doorstep. Remember, He doesn’t have to go out of His way to “punish” us for breaking His laws.

The punishment is built in. If you “break the Law” of gravity by stepping off of the roof of a forty story building, don’t blame God for “punishing you” with the sidewalk at the end of your journey. And don’t forget that there may be a gap between the sin and its consequences. It does no good to say “So far, so good” as you fly past the twentieth floor on your way down.

- (920) *Assign physical reminders of the choice God offers.* **“Now it shall be, when Yahweh your God has brought you into the land which you go to possess, that you shall put the blessing on Mount Gerizim and the curse on Mount Ebal. Are they not on the other side of the Jordan, toward the setting sun, in the land of the Canaanites who dwell in the plain opposite Gilgal, beside the terebinth trees of Moreh? For you will cross over the Jordan and go in to possess the land which Yahweh your God is giving you, and you will possess it and dwell in it. And you shall be careful to observe all the statutes and judgments which I set before you today.”** (Deuteronomy 11:29-32) How this was to be done would be recorded in Deuteronomy 27, which we’ll get to shortly. For now, just notice that God assigned physical objects—two entire mountains—to punctuate His instructions, or more precisely, the choice to be made between heeding them or not. His Law wasn’t merely to be a mental exercise—a series of esoteric rhetorical points to be discussed, debated, codified, and then relegated to musty theological tomes by learned scholars in ivory towers. Rather, the Torah was to live and breathe in the experience and walk of every Israelite—as obvious and as hard to ignore as a mountain. That was the point, of course, of using *two* mountains to make His point: one had to choose between them—you couldn’t stand upon both at the same time.
- (921) *Publicly display the words of the Law.* **“Now Moses, with the elders of Israel, commanded the people, saying: “Keep all the commandments which I command you today. And it shall be, on the day when you cross over the Jordan to the land which Yahweh your God is giving you, that you shall set up for yourselves large stones, and whitewash them with lime. You shall write on them all the words of this law, when you have crossed over, that you may enter the land which Yahweh your God is giving you, ‘a land flowing with milk and honey,’ just as Yahweh, God of your fathers, promised you.”** (Deuteronomy 27:1-3) Joshua ended up splitting Moses’ instructions into a two part process, because the Israelites’ crossing point over the Jordan was almost thirty miles from Mount Ebal—a long way to carry a pile of heavy unhewn boulders. First, he built an altar of large stones taken from the riverbed (Joshua 4:8-9) , setting them up in nearby Gilgal (4:20). Later, after the conquests of Jericho and Ai, the Israelites traveled north and gathered at Shechem, a village nestled between Mount Gerizim and Mount Ebal, to complete the task.

**“Therefore it shall be, when you have crossed over the Jordan, that on Mount Ebal you shall set up these stones, which I command you today, and you shall whitewash them with lime. And there you shall build an altar to Yahweh your God, an altar of stones; you shall not use an iron tool on them. You shall build with whole stones the altar of Yahweh your God, and offer burnt offerings on it to Yahweh your God. You shall offer peace offerings, and shall eat there, and rejoice before Yahweh your God. And you shall write very plainly on the stones all the words of this law.”** (Deuteronomy 27:4-8) So we read that **“Joshua built an altar to Yahweh, God of Israel, in Mount Ebal, as Moses the servant of Yahweh had commanded the children of Israel, as it is written in the Book of the Law of Moses: ‘an altar of whole stones over which no man has wielded an iron tool.’ And they offered on it burnt offerings to Yahweh, and sacrificed peace offerings.”** This was perfectly permissible, because the Tabernacle and the ark of the Covenant were there. **“And there, in the presence of the children of Israel, he wrote on the stones a copy of the law of Moses, which he had written.”** (Joshua 8:30-32)

If you want to bring militant atheists and their lawyers crawling out of the woodwork in America today, all you have to do is post a copy of the Ten Commandments in a public place. Even if we never attempted to keep this microcosm of the Torah, from our very beginnings we recognized the source of whatever justice is latent in our legal system: God’s word. But in our zeal to separate manmade religion from our public policy (in itself a noble and worthy goal) we have declared war on reason, declaring *persona non grata* the very God whose words these religions have twisted. So today, without Yahweh’s definition of right and wrong to guide us, our civilization has begun to degenerate. Our national doctrines are now (1) “might makes right,” (2) the golden rule (i.e., “he who has the gold gets to make the rules”), (3) “your government knows best,” (4) “share the wealth” (a.k.a. “rob from the productive and give the booty to everybody else”), (5) “protect the rights of criminals,” and (6) “all men are created equal—and some are more equal than others.” Because we have purposely neglected to build upon the foundation of judicial and moral sanity that Yahweh gave us, we now find ourselves a nation sinking into the quicksand of chaos and despair, easy prey to false Christs and false hope. Separating church and state may be a good thing; separating *God* and state is suicide.

- (922) *Be careful and attentive with God’s Word.* **“Then Moses and the priests, the Levites, spoke to all Israel, saying, “Take heed and listen, O Israel: This day you have become the people of Yahweh your God. Therefore you shall obey the voice of Yahweh your God, and observe His commandments and His statutes which I command you today.”** (Deuteronomy 27:9-10) Although their parents had (see Exodus 19:8) affirmed their determination to follow Yahweh’s

precepts (and then proceeded to rebel against Him every chance they got) this new generation of Israelites, many of whom were born during the wilderness wanderings, had never—until now—had the opportunity to formally voice their own opinion on the matter. Moses reports what they decided: **“Today you have proclaimed Yahweh to be your God, and that you will walk in His ways and keep His statutes, His commandments, and His judgments, and that you will obey His voice. Also today Yahweh has proclaimed you to be His special people, just as He promised you, that you should keep all His commandments, and that He will set you high above all nations which He has made, in praise, in name, and in honor, and that you may be a holy people to Yahweh your God, just as He has spoken.”** (Deuteronomy 26:17-19) My point is that we can only choose or reject Yahweh for ourselves; we *cannot* do so on behalf of other people, even our own children. In the end, everyone has to choose their own master; every individual must select whom—if anyone—they will trust with their eternal destiny.

Having voiced their choice, they are reminded—for the umpteenth time—that their commitment entails obedience. Note that it doesn’t actually demand *perfection*, for the Torah is peppered with provisions for dealing with sin: sacrifices, washings, and priestly intercession. It is a given that they will, being human, fall short of the mark. Obedience to Yahweh’s precepts therefore includes a willingness to avail oneself of His provision for reconciliation—it doesn’t presuppose that we won’t need it. That provision for reconciliation, of course, is personified in Yahshua the Messiah: the very “voice of Yahweh our God.”

- (923) *Know that behavior has consequences, for good or ill. “And Moses commanded the people on the same day, saying, ‘These shall stand on Mount Gerizim to bless the people, when you have crossed over the Jordan: Simeon, Levi, Judah, Issachar, Joseph, and Benjamin; and these shall stand on Mount Ebal to curse: Reuben, Gad, Asher, Zebulun, Dan, and Naphtali.’”* (Deuteronomy 27:11-13) These two “mountains” (actually just rocky hills, rising less than 1000 feet above the surrounding plain) are quite similar in a lot of ways, making them the ideal metaphor for “choosing one thing or the other.” As if to punctuate this fact, Ebal, the “mount of cursing” (whose name means “bare” or “bald”), is sparse on vegetation, while Gerizim, the “mount of blessing,” is covered with trees.

Like a card stunt at a football game, the idea here was to involve the whole audience in “acting out” or “performing” their commitment to following Yahweh’s instructions. Six tribes were to stand on the northern hill, Ebal, facing south, to confirm the curses for not following God’s Law, and the other six were to station themselves on Gerizim, facing

north, to affirm the blessings that would result from compliance with Yahweh's statutes. The Levites were to stand in the middle, like cheerleaders, reading the precepts, to which the audience was to respond by saying "Amen" (pronounced aw-Mane), which means "truly," or "so be it." It's from the verb *'aman*, meaning to support, confirm, be faithful, be established, to verify, to be certain, or to believe in.

The spatial orientation of this piece of "performance art" may be significant. Although Yahweh is omnipresent, the seat of divine power was culturally conceived to be in the north. Thus we read of Satan's ambition: **"For you have said in your heart: 'I will ascend into heaven; I will exalt my throne above the stars of God; I will also sit on the mount of the congregation on the farthest sides of the north."** (Isaiah 14:13) Gerizim's six "blessing" tribes would be facing north; in other words, they are pictured as being in communication and communion with the authority of Yahweh. Mount Ebal's six "cursing" tribes, meanwhile, are depicted as having their backs turned upon God.

There are twelve each of cursings and blessings listed. The cursings are listed as individual infractions: **"And the Levites shall speak with a loud voice and say to all the men of Israel... *Cursed is the one who does this.*"** The list is by no means comprehensive. It leans heavily toward the "practical" end of the scale—things that, for the most part, define "loving one's neighbor as oneself" or would otherwise tend to hold society together if the admonitions were heeded. Note also that the list stresses secretive, covert sins—things done underhandedly or in private.

(1) Idolatry—as in the Second Commandment: **'Cursed is the one who makes a carved or molded image, an abomination to Yahweh, the work of the hands of the craftsman, and sets it up in secret.' And all the people shall answer and say, 'Amen!'"** (Deuteronomy 27:14-15)

(2) Disrespect of parents—as in the Fifth Commandment: **"'Cursed is the one who treats his father or his mother with contempt.' And all the people shall say, 'Amen!'"** (Deuteronomy 27:16)

(3) Land fraud, included in the Eighth Commandment: **"'Cursed is the one who moves his neighbor's landmark.' And all the people shall say, 'Amen!'"** (Deuteronomy 27:17)

(4) Leading the innocent and helpless astray: **"'Cursed is the one who makes the blind to wander off the road.' And all the people shall say, 'Amen!'"** (Deuteronomy 27:18)

(5) Injustice and an unmerciful spirit toward the helpless, included within the Ninth Commandment: **"'Cursed is the one who perverts the justice**

due the stranger, the fatherless, and widow.' And all the people shall say, 'Amen!'" (Deuteronomy 27:19)

(6-9) Sexual sins, represented by the Seventh Commandment: **"'Cursed is the one who lies with his father's wife, because he has uncovered his father's bed.'** And all the people shall say, 'Amen!' **'Cursed is the one who lies with any kind of animal.'** And all the people shall say, 'Amen!' **'Cursed is the one who lies with his sister, the daughter of his father or the daughter of his mother.'** And all the people shall say, 'Amen!' **'Cursed is the one who lies with his mother-in-law.'** And all the people shall say, 'Amen!'" (Deuteronomy 27:20-23)

(10) Any manifestation of hatred: **"'Cursed is the one who attacks his neighbor secretly.'** And all the people shall say, 'Amen!'" (Deuteronomy 27:24)

(11) Perversion of justice: **"'Cursed is the one who takes a bribe to slay an innocent person.'** And all the people shall say, 'Amen!'" (Deuteronomy 27:25)

(12) Rebellion against God's revealed will: **"'Cursed is the one who does not confirm all the words of this law.'** And all the people shall say, 'Amen!'" (Deuteronomy 27:26)

The blessings, on the other hand, are not linked to individual good deeds, but are rather a listing of different ways Yahweh would bless Israel if they observed the blanket admonition to "keep My commandments." **"Now it shall come to pass, if you diligently obey the voice of Yahweh your God, to observe carefully all His commandments which I command you today, that Yahweh your God will...."** He would give them twelve kinds of blessing:

(1) Political ascendancy over other nations: **"Set you high above all nations of the earth. And all these blessings shall come upon you and overtake you, because you obey the voice of Yahweh your God...."**

(2) Security throughout the Land: **"Blessed shall you be in the city, and blessed shall you be in the country...."**

(3) A population boom, both of people and livestock: **"Blessed shall be the fruit of your body, the produce of your ground and the increase of your herds, the increase of your cattle and the offspring of your flocks...."**

(4) A plentiful food supply: **"Blessed shall be your basket and your kneading bowl...."**

(5) Triumph over circumstances: **"Blessed shall you be when you come in, and blessed shall you be when you go out...."**

(6) Military victory: **"Yahweh will cause your enemies who rise against you to be defeated before your face; they shall come out against you one way and flee before you seven ways...."**

(7) Fertile soil: **“Yahweh will command the blessing on you in your storehouses and in all to which you set your hand, and He will bless you in the land which Yahweh your God is giving you....”**

(8) A reputation as God’s chosen race: **“Yahweh will establish you as a holy people to Himself, just as He has sworn to you, if you keep the commandments of Yahweh your God and walk in His ways. Then all peoples of the earth shall see that you are called by the name of Yahweh, and they shall be afraid of you....”**

(9) Material wealth and prosperity: **“And Yahweh will grant you plenty of goods, in the fruit of your body, in the increase of your livestock, and in the produce of your ground, in the land of which Yahweh swore to your fathers to give you....”**

(10) Good weather: **“Yahweh will open to you His good treasure, the heavens, to give the rain to your land in its season, and to bless all the work of your hand....”**

(11) An overabundance of riches: **“You shall lend to many nations, but you shall not borrow....”**

(12) A position of leadership: **“And Yahweh will make you the head and not the tail; you shall be above only, and not be beneath, if you heed the commandments of Yahweh your God, which I command you today, and are careful to observe them. So you shall not turn aside from any of the words which I command you this day, to the right or the left, to go after other gods to serve them.” (Deuteronomy 28:1-14)**

Is the Torah optional? Sure it is. We have the option of heeding it and reaping its inevitable rewards, or ignoring it and suffering the curses that follow disobedience like a shadow on a sunny day.