

“The Making of the People of God”

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The journey, which the Israelites took to move from a paradigm of slavery to being the people through whom God would reveal himself to the rest of the world, involved several factors. Both the Old Testament and the New Testament passages in Deuteronomy and 1 Thessalonians clearly revealed that God had three priorities for bringing about his purposes – To have his people honor him, learn his words, and obey his laws.

The most significant principle in these scriptures is that God expects his people to honor him. According to these scriptures, honoring God starts with knowing that he is God and to respect him enough to focus on him alone. Honoring God also means that his people are not to allow themselves to be distracted or led astray by false idols. Finally, it means that his people are to revere his power and ability to provide for their needs.

In addition to learning to honor who God is, he also expects his people to also learn his laws (Deut 1:14). Repeatedly the scriptures talked about hearing the laws, learning the laws, talking about the laws, and teaching the laws to their children. This indicates that God expects his followers to not settle for hearing the words once, but rather to recite, repeat, remember the laws regularly.

From God’s perspective, knowing the law is not enough – he also expects his people to also obey the laws. Repeatedly God spoke of giving his people both blessings and curses. If his people would follow his laws, he would bless them. However, if his people would turn from his laws, he would curse them.

The books of Deuteronomy and 1 Thessalonians also revealed several things about the process God uses to bring about the development of his people. First he provided leadership, which could create and maintain the structure through which the people would learn. Second, God motivated them to want to move by providing a vision. Then he provided for their needs during their journey. He also provided them with instructions for how they were to live. Finally, he provided an environment in which their learning could be made meaningful.

Part of God's plan for bringing about the formation of his people was to provide them with God-ordained leadership. Moses, then Joshua were men whose lives were carefully designed by God so that they could be prepared to take on the role of leadership while God was taking the people through two different phases of the journey: Moses was to lead the people out of captivity and into the wilderness while God worked at changing their paradigms; and Joshua was to lead the people into the Promised Land and to help the people settle in to a new land and a new form of government. These two men had different callings, thus they were shaped differently for God's purposes. During Moses' tenure as the leader, God spoke directly to the people to testify as to Moses' authority. Once it was time for Moses to turn over his authority to Joshua, Moses testified to the people of Joshua's authority. These testimonies gave them the credibility they needed to carry out God's call for their lives.

In addition to providing his ordained leaders, God also repeatedly demonstrated his power to the people so that they would believe in him and in his leaders. God first demonstrated his power, through the plagues, before the people left Egypt. During the desert experience, he provided for their every need. God used these opportunities to teach his people that he is able to carry out on his promises of provision. As his people saw his ability to provide for their needs, they were increasingly able to trust him to continue to provide for their needs. Thus they were willing and able to be led into the unknown.

God not only demonstrated his power and ability to provide, he also motivated them. He gave his people a reason to want to be led into the unknown. God gave his people a vision – a promise for a better life. He promised them that if they did things his way, he would lead them into a land of freedom and prosperity – something these people had not known for many generations. He also gave examples of all the natural resources in the Promised Land as an example of what they could expect. He told them they would become a strong and mighty nation, which other nations would revere.

God equipped his people to enter into the Promised Land with the things they needed including leadership and motivation. However, before they could be allowed to roam free in the land, they needed instruction as to what God considered to be right living so that the people would not bring upon themselves God's curses. He had his leaders restate the commandments and laws, which he gave. He instructed them to carry on and pass on the laws, commandments and traditions to their children so that future generations could receive God's blessings. He had Moses remind them of what God had done for them and why. He reminded them of their past mistakes and rebellions. He had Moses provide the people with a structure of government and judicial processes so that the people could manage their daily affairs. He also had Joshua direct the different tribes into their territories, which they were to acquire. He also instructed them into how they were to enter their territories, including those inhabitants, whom they were to ignore, associate with, or annihilate. He even told them how to help each other as they moved in to take over their prescribed territories.

Finally, God provided the environmental factors, which were designed to facilitate the people's learning. First, he kept them primarily isolated from their neighbors, and told them not to associate with them. His instructions for how they were to live created a very tight community of people who were somewhat isolated from the rest of the world. This tight community allowed generations to raise and train their future generations with a minimum of distractions from outsiders. This homogeneous community allowed the nation to maintain the consistency it needed while it developed. As the nation itself developed, the culture was deeply established and engrained in the individuals. Thus providing the individuals with a strong sense of cultural heritage and identity.

In addition to providing his people with a strong cultural tradition through which the individuals could grow, God also provided the people with warnings and consequences for rebellion. If and when the people were to disregard God's commands, he would allow them to be disciplined. When the people were tired of the pain of the discipline, they would turn back to him in search of deliverance (Deut 4:30).

The journey the people experienced as God was forming them naturally had a few barriers. Namely, the people would not listen, they would not believe, and they would rebel. God warned against those who would not listen to him (Deut 8:20), which would, in turn, bring upon them the curses of God. Moses reminded them in Deut 10:1 that he broke the original two tablets containing the commandments in anger after he discovered they would not wait for him to return and thus engaged in idolatry.

While some would not listen, others would. However, much of the time, the biggest problem the people faced is that they would not believe God or his promises. Every step of the way, the people refused to believe that God would provide for their needs and deliver them. They often provoked God's anger because of it.

Finally, the people often outright rebelled against God's word. They knew what was expected of them, they believed God could deliver; yet they still chose to go their own way. It was in response to this rebellion that Moses said, "See, I am setting before you today a blessing and a curse: the blessing, if you listen to the commandments of the Lord your God, which I am commanding you today; and the curse, If you do not listen to the commandments of the Lord your God, but turn aside from the way which I am commanding you today, by following other gods which you have not known." (Deut 11:26-28)

In conclusion, what these passages teach us is that in order to please God and to be blessed by him, one needs to submit to his ways of teaching: honor his deity, learn what he expects of them, and to do what he instructs them to do. Through this process, the individual will discover that God will bring about in them a Godly and righteous character.