





# ISRAEL'S

## EXODUS & DELIVERANCE— THEN & NOW

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The book of Deuteronomy begins with a striking verse. In parentheses between verses 1 and 3, verse 2 reads, “(There are eleven days’ journey from Horeb by the way of mount Seir unto Kadesh-barnea)” (Deuteronomy 1:2). Because it is set within parentheses and because it seems to be relaying minutia, this verse is easily passed over. But, at closer examination, it can be one of the most thought-provoking verses in the Old Testament.

Identifying two of the sites in the verse makes this clearer. Horeb is another name for Mount Sinai, and Kadesh-barnea is the place where Moses and the children of Israel camped as they sent men into the promised land as spies. Kadesh-barnea was on the border of the promised land, and it was intended that the children of Israel would go from there and inherit the land.

In other words, it took the children of Israel 40 years to travel the distance they could have traveled in 11 days.

The full import of Israel’s meandering journey comes “when we realize that Israel’s experiences in the wilderness are both literal and allegorical of our own experiences.”<sup>1</sup> In Egypt, Israel was in bondage, as we are in bondage to sin. They left via a baptism-like experience across the Red Sea and undertook their wanderings in the wilderness. Such wilderness journeys are found in various places in the scriptures, and we can liken them to our mortal probation (see, for example, Alma 37:41–45).<sup>2</sup> Not long after entering the wilderness, Israel made covenants at Sinai. They then wandered for many years. Eventually they were brought to the river Jordan (which can be likened to the veil we pass through at death) and crossed it, entering into the promised land (which can symbolize the celestial kingdom). Reflecting

*The Israelites’ 40 years of wandering are a symbol of our own personal journey to believe.*

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## ISRAEL ENTERING THE PROMISED LAND



on the journey of the children of Israel could cause readers to think, “In what things am I taking 40 years to accomplish an 11-day task?”

Most believers find themselves somewhere in between Sinai (having made sacred covenants with the Lord) and crossing the river Jordan (entering the true promised land, or the celestial kingdom). Let’s turn to this part of our scriptural story in order to better understand what delayed the Israelites on their journey. Consider what we can glean from their mistakes and how we can stay on course to the celestial kingdom.

### Lack of Faith

While Israel had a host of problems during their wanderings, two incidents seem to have determined that Israel would wait 40 years before entering the promised land. Israel’s lack of faith in the delivering power of Jehovah was key.

The first incident happened at Mount Sinai. Israel had been promised a marvelous opportunity. They were commanded to prepare themselves, “for the third day the Lord will come down in the sight of all the people upon mount Sinai” (Exodus 19:11). To prepare for this event, Israel undertook three days of sanctification. On the third day the mount was filled with thunderings, lightnings, a thick cloud, and the sound of a trumpet (see Exodus 19:16). Then Moses “brought forth the people out of the camp to meet with God” (Exodus 19:17). At that time, Moses ascended and received the Ten Commandments. In Deuteronomy we read that “these words [the Ten Commandments] *the Lord spake unto all your assembly* in the mount out of the midst of the fire, of the cloud, and of the thick darkness, with a great voice” (Deuteronomy 5:22; emphasis added). In other words, every member of the house of Israel heard the Lord’s pronouncement.

Apparently the experience was too overwhelming for them. Though the Lord had more in store for them, the Israelites sent their leaders to Moses, telling him to converse with God alone. Moses told them to “fear not”

(Exodus 20:20), but “the people stood afar off, and Moses drew near unto the thick darkness where God was” (Exodus 20:21).

The children of Israel had heard the voice of the Lord and were afraid they would be consumed by fire if they heard more. This is truly astonishing. By now they had seen evidence of His delivering power time and again:


- They had witnessed the plagues in Egypt, including the slaying of the firstborn, and had been saved from them all.
- They had seen the armies of Pharaoh ready to crush them and had been delivered by the Lord.
- They had nearly starved, and the Lord had sent quail and then manna.
- They had been thirsty and had been delivered by water gushing from a rock.
- They had been saved from destruction at the hands of the Amalekites.

And yet, with all this, they refused the presence of the Lord. In short, *they did not believe* that the Lord had power to bring them safely into His own consuming presence.

Joseph Smith taught that this unbelief was the great downfall of Israel: “When God offers a blessing or knowledge to a man, and he refuses to receive it, he will be damned. The Israelites prayed that God would speak to Moses and not to them; in consequence of which he cursed them with a carnal law.”<sup>3</sup> And so the Israelites were left with the lower law because they did not believe that the Lord had the power to bring them to meet with God and ensure they would live.

The problem became compounded and clarified some-time later, when the children of Israel were at Kadesh-barnea. They had finally arrived at the borders of the promised land.

At this time they and the Lord agreed to send 12 spies, one from each of the tribes, in order to perform a reconnaissance mission (see Deuteronomy 1:22 and Numbers 13:1–2). All of the spies reported that the land was full of wonderful



*Will we see only our weaknesses,  
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produce and was extremely fertile. But only Joshua and Caleb felt that the Israelites should go forth and take the land. The other spies were full of dread because of the military strength of the people they saw in the promised land.

Speaking later to the Israelites, Moses told them:

“Ye would not go up, but rebelled against the commandment of the Lord your God:

“And ye murmured in your tents, and said, Because the Lord hated us, he hath brought us forth out of the land of Egypt, to deliver us into the hand of the Amorites, to destroy us.

“Whither shall we go up? our brethren have discouraged our heart, saying, The people is greater and taller than we; the cities are great and walled up to heaven; and moreover we have seen the sons of the Anakims [giants] there” (Deuteronomy 1:26–28).

Though Israel had seen one of the mightiest armies on earth, that of Egypt, defeated and destroyed by the hand of the Lord, they were afraid that He could not bring them into His rest in the promised land. Again Moses tried to reassure them as he had at the Red Sea. Here he exhorted Israel:

“Dread not, neither be afraid of them.

“The Lord your God which goeth before you, he shall fight for you, according to all that he did for you in Egypt before your eyes” (Deuteronomy 1:29–30).

Furthermore, he reminded them of the things the Lord had done for them “in the wilderness, where thou hast seen how that the Lord thy God bare thee, as a man doth bear his son, in all the way that ye went, until ye came into this place” (Deuteronomy 1:31).

Even with all of this, Israel refused to go, and in the end Moses was forced to lament that “in this thing ye did not believe the Lord your

God” (Deuteronomy 1:32). The Lord asked Moses, “How long will this people provoke me? and how long will it be ere they believe me, for all the signs which I have shewed among them?” (Numbers 14:11).

### **Not Accepting Personal Deliverance**

Just as ancient Israel struggled to believe in the Lord’s power to deliver them, there are individuals among latter-day Israel who struggle to accept the true redeeming power of Jesus Christ. We may very well understand that Christ suffered for us all and made it possible for us to repent. But at the same time many members of the Church do not feel that they can be exalted.

Latter-day Saint author Stephen E. Robinson summed it up well while speaking of Christ’s ability to make us clean: “Unfortunately, there are many members of the Church who simply do not believe this. . . . They may believe that the Church is true, that Jesus is the Christ, and that Joseph Smith was a prophet of God, while at the same time refusing to accept the possibility of their own complete forgiveness and eventual exaltation in the kingdom of God. They believe *in* Christ, but they do not *believe* Christ.”<sup>4</sup>

We may believe strongly in many things about the gospel while still struggling with its very core—the idea that Christ can deliver us and bring us into His promised land.

The Israelites had already seen the delivering power of Jehovah many times before they refused to go into the promised land. Undoubtedly, we too have felt the redeeming and delivering power of the Savior through His Atonement many times in our lives. Most who have been baptized have felt the deliverance of Christ. Since we have been forgiven in the past, why could not the Lord deliver us from all our sins and bring us into the celestial kingdom? We may as well ask why, after having defeated the Egyptian army, could not the Lord defeat the Amorites and the Anakim in the promised land? The answer is the same: Of course He can.

Will we “fear not” (Exodus 20:20), or will we give in to our own doubts about our future? Will we see only our

weaknesses, or will we remember how those shortcomings pale in comparison to Christ’s atoning power?

Fortunately, the biblical story does not end at Kadesh-barnea. Ancient Israel had entered into a covenant with the Lord, and as a part of that covenant they would inherit the promised land. First, however, they had to be stripped of all unbelievers. Thus, Israel was forced to remain in the wilderness, a place where they would have no chance of survival except through dependence on the Lord.

Brigham Young University professor S. Kent Brown has written of this: “The point of the growing lesson was that the Lord could be trusted and, indeed, had to be trusted. In effect, he left the Israelites without any resource upon which to call except himself. . . . Without being able to trust in the Egyptians and now having only the Lord to rely upon, whether in Egypt or in the desert, the Israelites had to bring themselves to trust God more than man.”<sup>5</sup>

It was this process that took Israel 40 years. But because of the covenantal love of the Lord, He did not give up on Israel. Though the Israelites did not have enough faith to enter the promised land after 11 days, the Lord worked with them until they were faithful enough to receive their inheritance. He purged them in the wilderness until they were ready to fulfill their part of the covenant.

### **Developing Sufficient Faith**

When Israel had been purged of unbelievers and developed sufficient faith, they came again to the borders of the promised land. This time they arrived not at Kadesh-barnea but at the river Jordan.

As their fathers had done at Sinai, Israel spent the day sanctifying themselves. They gathered their tents and belongings and arranged themselves behind the priests who bore the ark of the covenant—another important symbol. The lid of the ark of the covenant was also called the “mercy seat,” or “seat of atonement.” There was no more poignant symbol of Christ and his delivering power than the ark of the covenant. Only by following this symbol would Israel enter the promised land.

As we demonstrate our faith in Christ's delivering power, even to the point of getting our feet wet, the Lord will part the waters and bring about our redemption.

Upon Joshua's command, the priests who carried the ark picked it up and marched toward the river Jordan. The Israelites followed. They had been promised that they would reach the other side, but they first had to demonstrate their faith. They marched up to and then *into* the river. It was not until the feet of the priests bearing the ark were in the waters of the river that the Lord exerted His delivering powers and parted the water. "And the priests that bare the ark of the covenant of the Lord stood firm on dry ground in the midst of Jordan, and all the Israelites passed over on dry ground, until all the people were passed clean over Jordan" (Joshua 3:17). After this demonstration of faith, following squarely behind the seat of atonement and trusting fully in the delivering power of Him whom it symbolized, Israel finally entered into its land of inheritance.

So too it is with us. As we demonstrate our faith in Christ's delivering power, even to the point of getting our feet wet, the Lord will part the waters and bring about our redemption. We see in Israel's journey the pattern which we must follow in order to inherit our promised land. Whether it be 11 days or 40 years that lie ahead of us, we must follow the instructions of the Lord and have faith in His delivering power. As we do this, there is no doubt that He will bring us into the celestial kingdom. Thus He has covenanted, and God cannot lie. We will enter into His rest and dwell with Him. ■

#### NOTES

1. M. Catherine Thomas, "The Provocation in the Wilderness and the Rejection of Grace," in *Thy People Shall Be My People, and Thy God My God* (1994), 168.
2. See also Thomas, "The Provocation in the Wilderness," 169.
3. *Teachings of Presidents of the Church: Joseph Smith* (2007), 265.
4. Stephen E. Robinson, *Believing Christ* (1992), 8, 9.
5. S. Kent Brown, "Trust in the Lord: Exodus and Faith," in *The Old Testament and the Latter-day Saints* (1986), 93.