

What Do We Have To Offer?

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Lately, my 12-year-old son Cody has been re-reading Basil Wolverton's *The Bible Story*, published several years ago by the Worldwide Church of God. The narrative of these books, written for children but enjoyable for almost everyone, is naturally devoted to the Israelites. The six books cover the time from the Creation to Judah's return from exile in Babylon.

As Cody read about the children of Israel and their ups and downs—seemingly bursting with blessings one minute and enslaved the next—he asked, "Were they stupid?" We have probably all wondered this very thing ourselves at one time or another. We may not have expressed it quite as bluntly, but most of us have wondered just how intelligent they really were.

No, the Israelites were not stupid, just human. Even we converted people make our share of mistakes, as we readily admit. It is just our good fortune that God has not recorded our colossal mistakes for all to read—yet!

It is easy to think of those unconverted Israelites in a negative way. How many times do we read, "The children of Israel did evil in the sight of the LORD" (Judges 2:11; 3:7, 12; 4:1; 6:1; etc.)? We could get the impression they never did anything right!

We would be wrong, though, if we thought this; on occasion they did things that sometimes put us to shame! Even in their unconverted state, they made astounding sacrifices and performed great deeds that make us seem small in comparison. We will look at one of these.

Rags to Riches

Before the Exodus, the Israelites lived in slavery for generations. They lost the knowledge of God, and they lost their physical blessings. As slaves, they had little or nothing of their own, and they had no means or freedom to accumulate wealth.

When God delivered them from bondage, however, He allowed the Israelites to spoil their Egyptian masters (Exodus 12:35-36). In effect, they received all their accumulated back pay, with interest, all at once! The Egyptians gave them gold, silver, jewelry, fine clothing or whatever they requested. Suddenly, the Israelites were wealthy beyond imagination!

The average Israelite, like a bum winning the lottery, must have had a heady feeling looking at his new-found riches. The Israelites had no experience with wealth. What should one do with it? How does one keep it? How does one accumulate more of it?

Of course, in hurrying out of Egypt, they may not have had time to worry about this kind of thing! Besides their wealth, they also had front-row seats to one of the most awesome displays of God's power in man's history. They had watched all the plagues take place and seen the waters part and the Egyptians drown in the Red Sea. They knew what God was capable of doing.

Finally, they reached Mount Sinai, where they camped for eleven months. Here, they heard God's law taught and they entered into the Old Covenant with Him. God promised to make them "a special treasure . . . a kingdom of priests and a holy nation" if they obeyed Him and kept His covenant (Exodus 19:5-6), and they readily agreed (verse 8).

From this point through the rest of the book, God seems to emphasize three subjects: the Sabbath, the holy days and offerings. For instance, God gives Israel the Ten Commandments in chapter 20, and tradition states that this occurred on Pentecost, a holy day. God instructs the people about the Sabbath in verses 8-11 and about offerings in verse 24. In chapter 23 we find the Sabbath (verse 12), the holy days (verses 14-16) and offerings (verses 15, 17-18). These three subjects surface several more times in the remainder of Exodus' 40 chapters.

The Sabbath, Holy Days and Offerings

Why did God emphasize these three things to the Israelites? For all their lives, they had known nothing but work, seven days a week. One day was just like any other; they would wake, eat, work in the brickyards and start all over the next day. But the Sabbath gave them a break, a rest, a day of peace. It gave structure to their week.

It does the same for us. In our spiritual Egypt, our lives had no real purpose. Like the Israelites, our days repeated endlessly: sleep, eat, work. When God called us, all that had to change; we had to alter our rhythm to keep in time with God's weekly structure.

The holy days gave the Israelites a reason for living, a time of festivity just ahead on the calendar. Though they did not understand them as we do, they had enough knowledge of them to give them a vision of the Promised Land. Likewise, the holy days give us a vision of a much greater Promised Land, the Kingdom of God.

Offerings forced the Israelites to bear in mind who God really is. They had already seen Him supply their needs many times. He gave them freedom, food, water, protection, guidance, leadership, law and many other blessings. Offerings made them recognize that He had supplied all of these and that they had to depend on Him to continue to supply them. Offerings taught them—and teach us—humility and faith.

A Huge Freewill Offering

It is in this area of offerings that the children of Israel left us a wonderful example. In chapter 25, God asks for an offering for the building of the Tabernacle:

Then the LORD spoke to Moses, saying, "Speak to the children of Israel, that they bring Me an offering. From everyone who gives it willingly with his heart you shall take My offering. And this is the offering which you shall take from them: gold, silver, and bronze; blue and purple and scarlet yarn, fine linen thread, and goats' hair; rams' skins dyed red, badger skins, and acacia wood; oil for the light, and spices for the anointing oil and for the sweet incense; onyx stones, and stones to be set in the ephod and in the breastplate." (Exodus 25:1-7)

The people responded with an enormous outpouring of these things:

Then everyone came whose heart was stirred, and everyone whose spirit was willing, and they brought the LORD's offering. . . . They came, both men and women, as many as had a willing heart, and brought earrings and nose rings, rings and necklaces, all jewelry of gold, . . . fine linen, . . . silver or bronze. . . . All the women who were gifted artisans spun yarn. . . . The rulers brought onyx stones, and the stones to be set in the ephod and in the breastplate, and spices and oil. . . . The children of Israel brought a freewill offering to the LORD, all the men and women whose hearts were willing. . . . (Exodus 35:21-29)

The offering was so huge that Moses had to say, "Stop!" (Exodus 36:6).

For generations these people had been slaves, possessing nothing of substance. Now rich, they were willing to give much of their wealth to God. He had not even commanded it, just asked for it! In fact, God did not want it if they did not give it willingly (Exodus 25:2).

Certainly, their guilt over their sin with the Golden Calf played a part in this overwhelming response, but we can still learn from their abundant generosity of spirit. They did not have Bibles back in their tents from which they could "prove all things" (I Thessalonians 5:21, KJV). They had seen clear, physical proof that God was present and working in their behalf. When Moses told them, "God has asked for an offering to build the Tabernacle," they did not doubt that he was conveying God's Word, His will, to them.

They gave freely of their riches. "Willing" (*nadib*) in Exodus 35:5 means "generous," "magnanimous," "liberal" or "willing-hearted." In verse 21 "willing" (*nadab*) means "to offer freely," "to volunteer" or "to present spontaneously." Their offerings were spontaneous and generous, or as Paul says, cheerfully given (II Corinthians 9:7). And they kept on bringing them until Moses ordered them to quit.

A Rough Estimate

Like any good administrator, Moses took inventory of what the people gave (Exodus 38:21-31):

- » 29 talents and 730 shekels of gold (verse 24);
- » 100 talents and 1775 shekels of silver (verse 25); and
- » 70 talents and 2400 shekels of bronze (verse 29).

No one seems to agree how much this represents in modern currency, but we can get a rough estimate fairly easily. Using the equivalents found in *Smith's Bible Dictionary* (p. 739) and current market prices from the daily newspaper, it becomes a simple math problem.

- » At \$400 per ounce, the gold (approximately 90,000 oz.) converts to \$36 million!
- » At \$5.50 per ounce, the silver (approximately 155,000 oz.) converts to \$852,500.
- » We will estimate the bronze at \$250,000.
- » The people also gave fine cloth, expensive furs, precious stones and their labor.

Conservatively, we can estimate their offering at around \$40 million! Not bad for a nation of recently freed slaves!

A Modern Perspective

To get a better perspective on this, we need to put ourselves in their sandals for a moment. They had lived their entire lives with *nothing*! For the first time, they were free—and they were rich beyond their dreams. What did they think they would do with their money? Hoard it? Gamble it away? Spend it with the first caravan they encountered? Tuck a bit into the Bank of Sinai for a rainy day?

Of all things, would they give it away—freely, willingly, even gladly?

We have opportunities to give offerings at various times throughout the year, not just on the holy days. God wants us to see the example of the Israelites in their "first love" and imitate their generosity and willingness in giving (Romans 15:4; I Corinthians 10:11). Consider what would happen if we all gave as they did!

Of course, we understand that our circumstances are somewhat different. We have bills to pay and budgets to meet. We must shoulder an ever-increasing tax burden. Inflation takes its toll. We must provide for our own as best we can. God's instruction about offerings explicitly says, "Every man shall give as he is able, according to the blessing of the LORD your God which He has given you" (Deuteronomy 16:17).

However, it is not the amount of money we give that counts but the attitude in which we give it. "Let each one give as he purposes in his heart," Paul writes in II Corinthians 9:7, "not grudgingly or of necessity [*compulsion*, margin]; for God loves a cheerful giver." He wants us to learn this attitude because it is one of His character traits, for He is the giver of all good things (James 1:17).

Like the Israelites, we have come out of spiritual Egypt, having been redeemed from slavery to sin. We are now free to follow God's way, and we have hope, a true vision of life in God's Kingdom.

Spiritually, we are incredibly wealthy! We can see God. We can see Him working in our lives, in others' lives, in the church and on the world scene. Instead of a Tabernacle, we are working to build a spiritual Temple, with ourselves as living stones (I Peter 2:4-10).

In this way, we are in the same position spiritually as the children of Israel were physically. What do we have to offer in building God's spiritual Temple? If nothing else, we must "present [our] bodies a living sacrifice, holy acceptable to God, which is [our] reasonable service" (Romans 12:1). Each of us must determine for ourselves if we will follow the fine example of the Israelites in their generous spirit and willingness to give to God.