

Exodus 23: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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■■■■■ in this book of the covenant are devoted to animals and taking care of them. God created the animals. He delights in the animals. And one of the tasks that we have as human beings is to take care of and concern for the animals. God declares that he will send his angel before them. This seems to be a theophanic figure, a manifestation of God's own presence. He's the messenger of God himself and seems to be identified with God, at least in my understanding.

Looking back at Genesis, the angel appears on a number of occasions. It wrestles with Jacob. It appears to Abraham and to Sarah and declares that they will have a son in Genesis chapter 18. Here we have a section of sanctions following commands. There are three warnings to listen to the angel, a warning against worshipping foreign gods, and again another warning against the gods of the Canaanites. And these frame two blessings, blessings for obedience to the angel and then a blessing upon obedience more generally. There are consequences for obedience and disobedience.

They must utterly shun Canaanite idolatry and be faithful to the Lord. If they are faithful, God will bless them with food, with health, with fruitfulness, and he will drive out their enemies before them. God is the God of nature. And as Israel serves him, nature itself will support them. This section deals with principles of holy war, which can be troubling for us. It's important to remember that this war is primarily a war of God against the Canaanites. The Israelites have to remove the Canaanites, but just the Canaanites. It's not a war against paganism in general. They have to root paganism from the land, but not paganism as such from all over the world. No right was given to them to fight in the name of the Lord to develop a greater empire. In Genesis chapter 15, God declares that the sin of the Amorites had not yet reached its full measure. God gives them time before he judges them. The Canaanites could also leave the land and go elsewhere. Recognising these things can at least relieve some of our problems. It doesn't actually solve many of the difficulties and questions that we might have about this, but at least gives us a clearer sense of what's in view. The emphasis here is upon driving them out, removing them from the land, not exterminating them, but removing them from the land so that they go elsewhere, presumably. A question to consider, what are some of the ways, both in our treatment of animals and in our separation of death and life more generally, that we can be mindful not to boil a kid in its mother's milk.