

## Lecture 9

### **A NEIGHBOR AND A STRANGER. ENEMIES BECOME BROTHERS**

We start reading Chapter 23 of the Book of Exodus. Unlike previous chapters, it begins not with juridical prescriptions, but with purely moral ones; a person breaking them is not brought before a court. The words of this chapter are addressed directly to one's conscience. Most likely, such sequence of prescriptions has certain logic: educational process usually starts with prohibitions and encouragements, and only later one is trained to follow moral precepts voluntarily. In this way the ethical consciousness of a child is being formed: first, the norms of decency and coexistence are being imposed on him (or her), and gradually he (or she) becomes a conscious follower and adherent of them. Likewise the Israelites, being prepared by initial precepts of God's Law to make ethically right choice, now receive instructions which promote the development of subtle ethical intuition, life governed by conscience, inner and not only external righteousness. A certain role in the process of transition from adopting the commandments to their fulfillment is ascribed to punishments coming from above:

The rod and reproof give wisdom... (*Prov 29:15*)

Wisdom comes to the people through punishments and rebukes, letting them see the fine line between appropriate and inappropriate things, between something that is permitted and something that is not.

The first verse of this chapter reads:

You shall not spread a false report. You shall not join hands with the wicked to act as a malicious witness. (*Ex 23:1*)

The words "you shall not spread" translate Hebrew *awt al <lo ti'sa>*. It is forbidden to spread false (the word *avv <shav>* means both "emptiness," "vanity" and "lie," "false allegation") rumors, as well as to assist "the wicked," to be more precise, "the evildoer" (*iwr <ra'sha>*), in his plans, talks and deeds. The words "to act as a malicious witness" render the Hebrew phrase *smc di tyhl <lig'yot ed cha'mas>*, which literally means "being the witness of violence," that is being a silent bystander of someone's criminal acts. Thus God's Law requires from each person, first, to impede spreading any kind of lies; second, to hinder evil acts, and third, not to stay indifferent when the rights of other people are being flouted, but to make every effort to prevent anything like that.

If the majority of people persistently obeyed just this triple precept of all God's Law, not a single social or personal misdeed would ever produce any widespread impact or have long-term consequences. Having just sprung out any evil would immediately fade away, getting no encouragement from people around and, more than that, facing proper counteraction on their part. This is true in our days as much as it was so in ancient times, and turns out to be even more topical, because in our age of advanced information technologies and hitherto unknown technical inventions any evil gets far more chances to get wide public recognition.

The next command of the Law reads as follows:

You shall not follow a majority in wrongdoing; when you bear witness in a lawsuit, you shall not side with majority so as to pervert justice... (*Ex 23:2*)

These precepts, provided they are being carried out, become the most effective counteraction against any kind of totalitarianism, hinder its spreading. What enormous significance have they got in our age! All the most horrible events of the 20th century, including mass exterminations of people and entire nations, took place by tacit and sometimes boisterous approval of the multitude, when huge raving crowds could not conceal their joy. However, God's Law unequivocally forbids joining the majority in wicked acts, whatever reason underlies such decision — panic, misinterpreted patriotism, etc. The major tragedies of the 20th century would have been impossible if a significant number of people had kept no more than this very precept.

The following words gain particular significance in our previous context:

...Nor shall you be partial to the poor in a lawsuit. (*Ex 23:3*)

It seems that judges, on the contrary, tend to be prejudiced in favor of a rich person, who, at least, is able to give a bribe. But God's Law is such that one cannot add or take away anything from it (*Deut 4:2, 12:32*). In previous centuries, this prohibition could be perceived as a warning not to be biased in a lawsuit in favor of the poor, out of compassion, but to observe justice. However, after "proletarian revolutions" with their partiality toward "the poor" and persecution or even total destruction of "the rich," we get a chance to see the commandment from a different perspective. Historical experience enriches us because it reveals new facets of God's word, new implications of ancient commandments. The command "not to be partial to the poor," however, should be considered along with another one:

You shall not pervert the justice due to your poor in their lawsuits. (*Ex 23:6*)

Probably, this precept is of more universal character than the previous one, and together they embrace all those cases of legal proceedings when the property status of the defendant can have influence on the court. Being observed continually the two mentioned commands could serve the restoring of righteous judgment all over the world, in all nations.

Two more verses are found in between the given ones:

When you come upon your enemy's ox or donkey going astray, you shall bring it back.

When you see the donkey of one who hates you lying under its burden and you would hold back from setting it free, you must help to set it free. (*Ex 23:4-5*)

In verse 4 the word “enemy” translates Hebrew *oy`ev*, “the one who is at enmity with somebody,” while in verse 5 we have *so`neh*, i.e. “the one who hates.” Although the affinity of the meanings of both words is evident, the first one implies a state of an actual quarrel, while the second one describes one’s inner disposition, a hostile attitude. Yet, whatever is the degree of your hostility towards the described person, the commandment obliges you to give him a helping hand and thus make the first step toward reconciliation. However, not only reconciliation, but also relief of animals’ portion is meant here. Animals entrust their masters with the responsibility for their lives and do not participate in their enmity. There are many cases in the Scripture where God’s care for animals is manifest. For instance, commenting upon the Forth Commandment of the Decalogue Moses says:

...Six days you shall labor and do all your work. But the seventh day is a sabbath to the Lord your God; you shall not do any work — you, or your son or your daughter, or your male or female slave, or your ox or your donkey, or any of your livestock, or the resident alien in your towns, so that your male and female slave may rest as well as you... (*Deut 5:13-14*)

An ox and a donkey are mentioned here along with people as creatures that need and deserve rest (cf. *Ex 23:11*). More examples describing care for animals can be found in the Pentateuch; for instance, the command to release a bird sitting on the eggs by the road (*Deut 22:6-7*), which we are going to discuss while studying the Book of Deuteronomy. According to the command given in our verses, *Ex 23:4-5*, reconciliation with the enemy should harmonize with one’s concern for animals: in the presence of lower creatures people are supposed to call to mind their unity, their mission in this world and put an end to their hostility. This command deserves admiration all the more so, as it equates an enemy with a brother. For in the other place the Torah says:

You shall not see your neighbor’s donkey or ox fallen on the road and ignore it; you shall help to lift it up. (*Deut 22:4*)

The Hebrew original has *Kyca <a`cheecha>* — “brother.” Thus, one’s enemy should be treated in the same way as one’s brother! The laws of such kind were originally intended to prepare the mentality of the people for the future evangelical revelation, which states:

...Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be children of your Father in heaven; for he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the righteous and on the unrighteous. (*Mt 5:44-45*)

Having instructed the people in righteousness, having “polished” their conscience, the Law gets back to practical issues relating to rendering justice. One of them is of truly great significance for all times:

Keep far from a false charge, and do not kill the innocent and those in the right, for I will not acquit the guilty. (*Ex 23:7*)

The command “to keep far from a false charge” has many implications, one of them being the following: as soon as even the slightest possibility of unfair conviction emerges, one should refrain from pronouncing the sentence. Especially it concerns the death penalty, when the consequences are irremediable. If there is still a chance that the sentence can bring about death of “the innocent and those in the right,” the Law commands to avoid it or to “keep far” from executing such sentence when it is already passed. It is better to save the life of a guilty man than to let an innocent person perish. Talking about the offender who escapes punishment because of lack of evidence, the Lord warns, “I will not acquit the guilty” (Hebrew text has *iwr <ra`sha>* — “evildoer”). Hence, the Most High himself will inflict punishment on a wicked man who escaped condemnation.

Further, we read a very significant instruction concerning bribes in court:

You shall take no bribe, for a bribe blinds the officials, and subverts the cause of those who are in the right. (*Ex 23:8*)

The word “cause” translates Hebrew *rbd <da`var>*, which can be also rendered as “word.” The phrase “those who are in the right” implies *Myqydx <tzadi`kim>*, the righteous, such as the judges should be. The verse teaches that even the words of the righteous judges can be “perverted,” “tangled” (for such is the meaning of the verb *Pls <sa`laf>*) because of bribery. God’s Law considers human weaknesses and provides such conditions for human activities, which make observing the commandments easier.

Continuing the discussion of matters relating to judgment, the Scripture teaches to protect the rights of a resident alien, which are wholly equated with the rights of a native resident (cf. *Ex 12:49, Lev 24:22*):

You shall not oppress a resident alien; you know the heart of an alien, for you were aliens in the land of Egypt. (*Ex 23:9*)

The word *wpn <nefesh>*, “[animal] soul,” denotes the whole range of negative emotions that can overshadow the life of an alien if he is mistreated by those around him. This is one of the implications of the commandment relating to interpersonal relations that Jesus Christ regarded as of paramount importance:

In everything do to others as you would have them do to you; for this is the law and the prophets. (*Mt 7:12*)

Continuing expressing its concern about the destitute, the Law now speaks not only about aliens, but also about “needy” people in general (Heb. *Nvyba <ev`yon>* means “beggar,” “hungry,” from the verb *hba <a`va>* — “to want,” “to crave,” that is literally, “starving”):

For six years you shall sow your land and gather in its yield; but the seventh year you shall let it rest and lie fallow, so that the poor of your people may eat; and what they leave the wild animals may eat. You shall do the same with your vineyard, and with your olive orchard. (*Ex 23:10–11*)

While the first tithe was to be given to the Levites who instructed the people in the Law, and was also intended for maintaining the Temple, “the second” tithe was to be set apart from the harvest during six non-jubilee years and was meant

for the poor (Deut 14:28–29, 26:12–13). But on the seventh, “sabbatical,” year the fruit of the land lying fallow belonged to everybody regardless of social differences. This seventh year serves as a prototype for the Kingdom of God after six thousand years of human history, a prototype of the seventh millennium — the age of justice and universal happiness (Isa 11:6–9, 65:17–25, 66:22–23; Rev 21:1–5; 22:1–5).

This context helps to understand both literal and prototypical meaning of repeating the commandment of the Sabbath day:

Six days you shall do your work, but on the seventh day you shall rest, so that your ox and your donkey may have relief, and your homeborn slave and the resident alien may be refreshed. (*Ex 23:12*)

The description of the Sabbath day shows that God’s compassion embraces animals as well as people. The prophet Isaiah tells the same thing:

The wolf shall live with the lamb, the leopard shall lie down with the kid, the calf and the lion and the fating together, and a little child shall lead them.

The cow and the bear shall graze, their young shall lie down together; and the lion shall eat straw like the ox.

The nursing child shall play over the hole of the asp, and the weaned child shall put its hand on the adder’s den.

They will not hurt or destroy on all my holy mountain; for the earth will be full of the knowledge of the Lord as the waters cover the sea. (*Isa 11:6–9*)

All ethical laws set forth in Chapter 23 are concluded with a call for the strictest adherence to monotheism:

Be attentive to all that I have said to you. Do not invoke the names of other gods; do not let them be heard on your lips. (*Ex 23:13*)

The words “be attentive” translate Hebrew *vmwt tisha`meru* — “guard yourself,” “be careful,” “take care of yourself.” A more precise rendering is “be careful in all that I have said to you...” That is, both individual and social life of the Israelites should be enclosed within the blessed bounds of the Law given to them and should not overstep these bounds. In this way the integrity of each individual and the people as a whole will be “guarded.”

Indeed, as long as the commandments of God’s Law were kept, the people experienced spiritual and material prosperity; going astray from them, “overstepping” their bounds gave effect to the curses that guarded the “fence” of the Law like watchful sentinels and struck anyone who abandoned this blessed shelter:

Do not go out into the field, or walk on the road; for the enemy has a sword, terror is on every side.

<...>

I have made you a tester and a fortress among my people so that you may know and test their ways. (*Jer 6:25–27*)

This is why the prophet Isaiah calls those who destroy “the fence” of God’s Law and overstep its bounds *Mytycwm Mynb <ba`nim mashkhi`tim>* — “sons who destroy”; NRSV reads, “children who deal corruptly”:

Ah, sinful nation, people laden with iniquity, offspring who do evil, children who deal corruptly, who have forsaken the Lord, who have despised the Holy One of Israel, who are utterly estranged. (*Isa 1:4*)

The verse from the Book of Exodus under consideration forbids mentioning “the names of other gods.” The Hebrew original reads: “the name [Mw <shem>] of other gods,” because the essence of idolatry remains the same despite the difference of the names. A person (or entire people) either serves the Lord or not, either keeps his commandments, or rejects them.

As we have already mentioned, God is a Lawmaker; he and his Law constitute a single entity. Denying one of its parts immediately entails rejecting another. When the people had to make a choice, when they hesitated whether to accept God’s will or to follow pagan lifestyle, the prophet described them as “limping”:

Elijah then came near to all the people, and said, “How long will you go limping with two different opinions? If the Lord is God, follow him; but if Baal, then follow him.” The people did not answer him a word. (*1 Kings 18:21*)

In a sense it is better to be deluded for a while and then return to the Lord with your whole heart in sincere repentance, than to consider yourself innocent in God’s eyes while rejecting his commandments:

...I know your works; you are neither cold nor hot. I wish that you were either cold or hot. So, because you are lukewarm, and neither cold nor hot, I am about to spit you out of my mouth. For you say, ‘I am rich, I have prospered, and I need nothing.’ You do not realize that you are wretched, pitiable, poor, blind, and naked. (*Rev 3:15–17*)

After the command to follow the One Lord and his Law, the Torah calls the people to devote to God their entire life symbolically expressed by the year cycle. This call is echoed in the description of the major festivals of the year:

Three times in the year you shall hold a festival for me. You shall observe the festival of unleavened bread; as I commanded you, you shall eat unleavened bread for seven days at the appointed time in the month of Abib, for in it you came out of Egypt. No one shall appear before me empty-handed.

You shall observe the festival of harvest, of the first fruits of your labor, of what you sow in the field. You shall observe the festival of ingathering at the end of the year, when you gather in from the field the fruit of your labor. (*Ex 23:14–16*)

Three festivals — Mydivm <moa`dim> (the word is found in Gen 1:14) — are timed to three culmination points of the agricultural year cycle, three harvest seasons in the Holy Land: the Passover (“the Festival of Unleavened Bread”) is timed to barley harvest, Pentecost (“the Festival of the first fruits”) is timed to wheat harvest, the Feast of Tabernacles is timed to “ingathering at the end of the year” (cf. Lev 23:4–21, 33–43; Ex 23:16, 34:18–23; Deut 16:1–17). For this reason three times a year an Israelite has to come to the Temple with “the first fruits” of each harvest, devoting them to the Lord as a sign of his gratitude to the Originator of existence (Ex 22:29, 23:19; Lev 23:10–11). This means that the ultimate significance of the labor of a person who offers “the first fruits” and tithes of his harvests to the Lord consists in sacrificial service. Offering “the first fruits” of the harvest the person symbolically consecrates all the fruits of his labor

to the Lord. Dedicating the principal days of the agricultural year to the Lord an Israelite “offers,” “gives away” all the days of the year during which he toiled preparing the festival sacrifices; in the same way, Sabbath celebration facilitates deep contact with God during weekdays.

However, in addition, these three festival seasons symbolize three stages of human lifetime: youth, maturity and the end of life. The Passover corresponds to the first call of God, perceived in youth — the call to “free oneself from Egyptian bondage,” that is from the state of being enslaved by animal nature, by sin. “The Exodus from Egypt,” release from the “pharaoh’s” control, i.e. the control of the undermost egocentric self, and following the call of supreme, divine “Self,” is associated with eating unleavened bread and abstaining from yeast. As we know, one of the implications of this prohibition consists in the fact that yeast signifies evil desires and inclinations that “spoil” blamelessness and purity of one’s life (Mt 16:6, Lk 12:1). That is why talking about those who have utterly distorted their spiritual image and showed disloyalty to their calling, the Lord says through the prophet Zephaniah:

At that time I will search Jerusalem with lamps, and I will punish the people who rest complacently on their dregs, those who say in their heart, “The Lord will not do good, nor will he do harm.” (*Zeph 1:12*)

The English word “dregs” renders Hebrew *rmw* <`shemer> which is used here to mean “yeast.” Yeast symbolizes turbulence of passions. It is youth that can be characterized by high risks of getting indulged into the sinful desires of human egocentric nature; it is the “spring time” of our life that especially needs self-control, “unleavened bread.” Apostle Paul warns about this:

Clean out the old yeast so that you may be a new batch, as you really are unleavened. For our paschal lamb, Christ, has been sacrificed. Therefore, let us celebrate the festival, not with the old yeast, the yeast of malice and evil, but with the unleavened bread of sincerity and truth. (*1 Cor 5:7–8*)

Pentecost corresponds to maturity. The festival is timed to summer period (it is celebrated on the 6th of Sivan, corresponding to May–June), when the nature is in full bloom. This is the time when a person reaps “the first fruits” of his labor, harvests what was sown in his youth (Ex 23:15). It was on the day of Pentecost that the people heard the Ten Commandments spoken by the voice of God from Mount Sinai (Ex 19:1–11). The spirit that has reached maturity starts comprehending the Law of God, the Decalogue, with its 613 precepts and statutes, for at this stage human mind acquires the ability to perceive the many-sided meaning of God’s will concerning his life.

Finally, the Festival of Tabernacles corresponds to old age. It is timed to autumn period (15th – 22nd of Tishri always fall on September–October) and signifies “ingathering of the harvest,” summing up at the end of the year. The life of a righteous person who keeps the commandments ends in happiness and joy, produces fruit in abundance, and his old age is the threshold and the anticipation of passing to the higher world, joining “the spirits of the righteous made perfect” (Heb 12:22–23):

The righteous flourish like the palm tree, and grow like a cedar in Lebanon. They are planted in the house of the Lord; they flourish in the courts of our God. In old age they still produce fruit; they are always green and full of sap, showing that the Lord is upright; he is my rock, and there is no unrighteousness in him. (*Ps 92:12–15*)

This is why the Feast of Tabernacles is noted for special celebration and rejoicing:

Now, the fifteenth day of the seventh month, when you have gathered in the produce of the land, you shall keep the festival of the Lord, lasting seven days; a complete rest on the first day, and a complete rest on the eighth day.

On the first day you shall take the fruit of majestic trees, branches of palm trees, boughs of leafy trees, and willows of the brook; and you shall rejoice before the Lord your God for seven days.

You shall keep it as a festival to the Lord seven days in the year; you shall keep it in the seventh month as a statute forever throughout your generations... (*Lev 23:39–41*)

It is stressed that this “rejoicing” should involve relatives and members of household as well as poor people, the Levites and the strangers — the fellow-heirs of the eternal life for which a person is getting prepared in his declining years:

You shall keep the festival of booths for seven days, when you have gathered in the produce from your threshing floor and your wine press.

Rejoice during your festival, you and your sons and your daughters, your male and female slaves, as well as the Levites, the strangers, the orphans, and the widows resident in your towns.

Seven days you shall keep the festival for the Lord your God at the place that he will choose; for the Lord your God will bless you in all your produce and in all your undertakings, and you shall surely celebrate. (*Deut 16:13–15*)

The concluding words of the precept relating to celebration suggest the all-embracing blessing (“...the Lord your God will bless you... in all your undertakings...”) and continual joy (“...and you shall surely celebrate”). Finally, leaving homes and dwelling in tabernacles (booths) for seven days points to the future exodus to the other life, resettlement of human spirit into the eternal dwelling places (Lk 16:9; Jn 14:2):

...You shall live in booths for seven days; all that are citizens in Israel shall live in booths, so that your generations may know that I made the people of Israel live in booths when I brought them out of the land of Egypt: I am the Lord your God. (*Lev 23:42–43*)

As to the command “not to appear before God empty-handed” (Ex 23:15), it implies not only literal “first fruits” and tithes of the harvest, but also the obligation of a believer to bear spiritual fruit to the Lord at every stage of his life:

...So that you may lead lives worthy of the Lord, fully pleasing to him, as you bear fruit in every good work and as you grow in the knowledge of God... (*Col 1:10*)

The following command may be referred to the critical periods of transition from one age to another:

Three times in the year all your males shall appear before the Lord God. (*Ex 23:17*)

Having passed through some certain age period and entering the next one a person should examine the fruits of his labors and “offer them to the Lord”. The phrase “shall appear” renders Hebrew *hary* *⟨year`eh⟩*, which means “[let him] appear,” “[let him] become seen,” “[let him] turn visible.” At this moment the person should feel as if “the Lord’s face shines upon him,” as if he stands in his presence (Num 6:25; Ps 80:7)

...For all who do evil hate the light and do not come to the light, so that their deeds may not be exposed. But those who do what is true come to the light, so that it may be clearly seen that their deeds have been done in God. (*Jn 3:20–21*)

However, the precepts relating to the festivals contain some other important instructions, such as:

You shall not offer the blood of my sacrifice with anything leavened, or let the fat of my festival remain until the morning. (*Ex 23:18*)

It is clear that the Passover sacrifice is meant; by the time of its offering all yeast is supposed to be removed from the houses (Ex 12:15). The liturgy should be conducted in purity; and yeast, as a symbol of sin and vice, must be removed. The Passover night appointed for eating the paschal lamb is a symbol of “an acceptable time, a day of salvation” (1 Cor 5:7–8, 2 Cor 6:2). It should be fully devoted to the divine service: “in the morning,” when “the sun of righteousness” is rising (Mal 4:2), in other words, when the Kingdom of God has come, it will be too late for eating the supper of God’s salvation...

The choicest of the first fruits of your ground you shall bring into the house of the Lord your God. You shall not boil a kid in its mother’s milk. (*Ex 23:19*)

We have already discussed the first part of this verse. Concerning the prohibition of boiling a kid in its mother’s milk, it is found in the Torah three times in different contexts. Here and in Ex 34:26 it accompanies the command of bringing “the first fruits” to the Temple, while in Deut 14:21 this precept is placed among dietary laws. Besides ethical significance, which instructs people to be merciful towards animals, it forbids a Canaanite ritual, which, as it was clarified in the 20th century after decoding the Canaanite texts from Ugarit, was a part of the harvest festival reproducing the “sacred wedding ceremony” of gods. This is why the commandment stresses the necessity of participating in the Lord’s festivals and avoiding pagan celebrations. At the same time this prohibition, if considered in the context of Deut 14:21 as a hygienic prescription, reflects God’s concern for our health.

Concluding social, ethical and ritual laws listed here the Lord says about his special angel, who is sent to assist and “supervise” the people of Israel:

I am going to send an angel in front of you, to guard you on the way and to bring you to the place that I have prepared. Be attentive to him and listen to his voice; do not rebel against him, for he will not pardon your transgression; for my name is in him. (*Ex 23:20–21*)

We remember that Hebrew *Kalm* *⟨mal`akh⟩* as well as Greek *aggeloi* *⟨angelos⟩* means “messenger,” “emissary,” and “angel” as a spiritual being. The

angel mentioned here is endowed with a special triple mission (unlike ordinary angels who, according to tradition, are entrusted with only one assignment). First, he must “guard” the people on the way (Hebrew *rmw* <*sha`mar*> — “to guard,” “to protect”); second, he must “bring” them to the Holy Land, i.e. assist them in conquering it; and third, he is to proclaim the Lord’s will to the people (“listen to his voice”), at the same time reprimanding them for disobedience (“he will not pardon your transgression”). The word “transgression” renders Hebrew *iwp* <*pasha*>, derived from the verb “to overstep,” “to diverge,” “to rise against,” and “to defy authority.” What is meant here is not just a transgression, i.e. violation of some commandment due to human weakness, carelessness or the influence of evil passions, etc.; such transgressions are atoned by the sacrifices (Lev 4:2, 35; 5:17–18). But the sin of rebellion against the Lord, of the conscious and daring confronting him, is equated with the blasphemy and is not forgiven till the moment of sinner’s death:

And speak to the people of Israel, saying: Anyone who curses God shall bear the sin.

One who blasphemes the name of the Lord shall be put to death; the whole congregation shall stone the blasphemer. Aliens as well as citizens, when they blaspheme the Name, shall be put to death. (*Lev 24:15–16*)

Both the literal blasphemy spoken against the name of the Most High and the intentional mocking of his commandments entails death of the violator:

But whoever acts high-handedly, whether a native or an alien, affronts the Lord, and shall be cut off from among the people.

Because o having despised the word of the Lord and broken his commandment, such a person shall be cut off and bear the guilt. (*Num 15:30–31*)

It is for such actions with regard to the Lord and his commandments that the curses of the Law befall the people:

But if you will not obey me, and do not observe all these commandments, if you spurn my statutes, and abhor my ordinances, so that you will not observe all my commandments, and you break my covenant, I in turn will do this to you: I will bring terror on you; consumption and fever that waste the eyes and cause life to pine away. You shall sow your seed in vain, for your enemies shall eat it. (*Lev 26:14–16*)

If we compare these words with the warning of the Gospels,

Therefore I tell you, people will be forgiven for every sin and blasphemy, but blasphemy against the Spirit will not be forgiven.

Whoever speaks a word against the Son of Man will be forgiven, but whoever speaks against the Holy Spirit will not be forgiven, either in this age or in the age to come. (*Mt 12:31–32*)

we will see that the words of Jesus concerning blasphemy against the Spirit refer to the same kind of violation — a high-handed contempt for the commandments, blasphemy against the Creator and deliberate violation of his will.

The angel sent by the Lord is endowed with exceptional power in order to accomplish his three missions. For this purpose the Lord puts his name inside him: *vbrqb ymw yk* <*ki she`mi be-kir`bo*> — “for my name is in him.” The prophet

Isaiah refers to this angel as “the angel of the Lord’s presence,” i.e. a mediator between the Lord and his people, who is always in the presence of the Lord:

In all their distress he was distressed; the angel of his presence saved them; in his love and in his pity he redeemed them; he lifted them up and carried them all the days of old. (*Isa 63:9*)

In Jewish interpretation, the words “my name is in him” are to be understood taking into account gematria, i.e. the sum of the numerical equivalents of the letters that make the angel’s name, which is identical with the numerical meaning of God’s name. The aggadic materials call this angel Nvreem <Meta`tron>; this name probably goes back to Greek Meqatronoj <Meta`tronos> — “[the one standing] near the [Lord’s] throne.” In other words, the closest angel to the Lord is meant. The numerical meaning of his name written in Hebrew is

$314 (m + e + e + r + v + N = 40 + 9 + 9 + 200 + 6 + 50 = 314)$ , and it is equal to the gematria of the name “Shaddai” (i.e. “the Almighty” or “the All-sufficient”):  $w + d + y = 300 + 4 + 10 = 314$ . The deepest mysteries of the spiritual world are connected with this angel; he is repeatedly mentioned in the Old Testament (in our commentary see also pp. ...).

But if you listen attentively to his voice and do all that I say, then I will be an enemy of your enemies and a foe of your foes. (*Ex 23:22*)

The angel functions as God’s spokesman, accurately conveying the words of the One who send him. It is evident from the fact that the first and the third person singular are interchanged in the text: “his voice” refers to the angel, “I say” — to God. The same is true of the next verse:

When my angel goes in front of you, and brings you to the Amorites, the Hittites, the Perizzites, the Canaanites, the Hivites, and the Jebusites, and I blot them out... (*Ex 23:23*)

— “[He] brings you,” but “I blot them out.”

Concerning the “blotting out” of the nations that inhabited the land of Canaan, here the destruction of their *kingdoms* is implied, the strongholds of demonic cults that were accompanied with human sacrifices (*Lev 18:21, 20:1–5; Deut 12:31; 2 Kings 23:10; Jer 7:31*). As to their *inhabitants*, according to God’s Law, they had either to turn to the true God and to enter God’s community as full members, if such was their desire; or, in case they wished to keep worshipping idols, to be driven out from the Holy Land. By no means their “total extermination” is implied here, as some commentators misinterpret the verse. This question undoubtedly needs further consideration.

In the given verse the words “I blot them out” translate Hebrew vytdckhv <ve-hicheh-chad`tiv> — from the verb dck <ka`chad> — “to blot out,” “to obliterate,” “to conceal.” Here the “obliteration” of the remains of the Canaanites’ bloody idolatry is implied (cf. v. 24), but not the extermination of the population of the Canaanite states. Concerning their inhabitants the Pentateuch and other books of the Bible again and again speak of “driving them out,” but not of “destroying” them. The phrase “to drive out” translates the verb wrg <ga`rash> — “to banish,” “to send away.” The same verb was used in the description of Adam’s expulsion

from the garden of Eden and in the story of Cain's expulsion from the face of the Lord (Gen 3:24, 4:14). The noun derived from this verb, *hwvrg <gru'sha>*, in the Scripture (Num 30:10, Ezek 44:22 etc.) stands for a divorced woman, i.e. a woman sent out by her husband (Deut 24:1). Just as in the above-listed cases those driven out were not put to death, in the same way the inhabitants of Canaan were to remain alive, but in case they opposed the word of God they were to leave the Holy Land:

If you will diligently observe this entire commandment that I am commanding you, loving the Lord your God, walking in all his ways, and holding fast to him,  
Then the Lord will drive out all these nations before you, and you will dispossess nations larger and mightier than yourselves. (*Deut 11:22-23*)

This verse speaks not only of "driving out" of the nations, but also of their "dispossession" by Israel. The text implies those of the Canaanites who wish to join Israel, who give up the abominable worship of idols, having repented of it, and wholeheartedly accept God's Law.

Having listed all possible kinds of sexual immorality connected with shrine rituals characteristic of the Canaanite cults the Most High says:

Do not defile yourselves in any of these ways, for by all these practices the nations I am casting out before you have defiled themselves. (*Lev 18:24*)

Here again expulsion and not extermination is implied. The same phrase is repeated in the description of various types of black magic that were practiced by the inhabitants of Canaan:

For whoever does these things is abhorrent to the Lord; it is because of such abhorrent practices that the Lord your God is driving them out before you. (*Deut 18:12*)

As to the Amorites and other nations of Canaan, we read that they are *driven out* before the Israelites:

Observe what I command you today. See, I will drive out before you the Amorites, the Canaanites, the Hittites, the Perizzites, the Hivites, and the Jebusites. (*Ex 34:11*)

Notice that the expulsion is described not as an instantaneous act (which one could expect following the theory of "extermination" of these peoples by the Israelites), but as a gradual process:

The Lord your God will clear away these nations before you little by little; you will not be able to make a quick end of them, otherwise the wild animals would become too numerous for you. (*Deut 7:22*)

The question to God raised on behalf of the whole nation concerns expulsion of the Canaanites and not their destruction:

If you say to yourself, "These nations are more numerous than I; how can I dispossess them?" (*Deut 7:17*)

Taking into account all the above-mentioned excerpts, we can conclude that total extermination is by no means implied here. Let us look, however, at how the Lord's commands concerning the conquered nations of the Holy Land were carried out in practice (later we shall discuss how they were treated on the battlefield, in wartime). In the Book of Joshua we read:

They did not, however, drive out the Canaanites who lived in Gezer: so the Canaanites have lived within Ephraim to this day but have been made to do forced labor. (*Josh 16:10*)

While the Pentateuch includes God's commands concerning those Canaanites who do not want to give up their detestable cults, in the Book of Joshua we find the description of how these instructions are carried out. Once again, we read about expulsion, not destruction:

But the people of Judah could not drive out the Jebusites, the inhabitants of Jerusalem; so the Jebusites live with the people of Judah in Jerusalem to this day. (*Josh 15:63*)

As to the fate of those Canaanites who were involved in idolatry, the Lord himself, while giving promises to Joshua, repeats the same things that he has frequently told Moses, Joshua's great teacher and the leader of the people, preceding him:

...All the inhabitants of the hill country from Lebanon to Misrephoth-maim, even all the Sidonians. I will myself drive them out from before the Israelites; only allot the land to Israel for an inheritance, as I have commanded you. (*Josh 13:6*)

Giving authoritative orders to the heads of the tribes that were subordinate to him, Joshua speaks of the expulsion of pagan inhabitants of the land, accepting it as a natural thing, and not of their extermination:

...But the hill country shall be yours, for though it is a forest, you shall clear it and possess it to its farthest borders; for you shall drive out the Canaanites, though they have chariots of iron, and though they are strong. (*Josh 17:18*)

Finally, because of their sins, the people of God could not banish all the Canaanites entirely from the Holy Land. The Scripture describes it in such detail that we have not a slightest doubt concerning the fate of those who continued to resist God's will:

Yet the Manassites could not take possession of those towns; but the Canaanites continued to live in that land.

But when the Israelites grew strong, they put the Canaanites to forced labor, but did not utterly drive them out. (*Josh 17:12-13*)

Even the giants, the descendants of the one-time powerful tribe of the sons of Anak (from Heb. *Ni <a'nak>* — “necklace”; according to a legend, the Anakim were men of great stature with excessively long necks on which they wore necklaces made of human bones; on the sons of Anak see also p...), were not destroyed by Joshua's warriors, but expelled:

And Caleb drove out from there the three sons of Anak: Sheshai, Ahiman, and Talmai, the descendants of Anak. (*Josh 15:14*)

In the Book of Judges we find the enumeration of the many Canaanite tribes and settlements that were not expelled by the Israelites (notice how often and how persistently the phrase “to drive out” is used here):

The Lord was with Judah, and he took possession of the hill country, but could not drive out the inhabitants of the plain, because they had chariots of iron.

Hebron was given to Caleb, as Moses had said; and he drove out from it the three sons of Anak.

But the Benjaminites did not drive out the Jebusites who lived in Jerusalem; so the Jebusites have lived in Jerusalem among the Benjaminites to this day.

<...>

Manasseh did not drive out the inhabitants of Beth-shean and its villages, or Taanach and its villages, or the inhabitants of Dor and its villages, or the inhabitants of Ibleam and its villages, or the inhabitants of Megiddo and its villages; but the Canaanites continued to live in that land.

<...>

And Ephraim did not drive out the Canaanites who lived in Gezer; but the Canaanites lived among them in Gezer.

Zebulun did not drive out the inhabitants of Kitron, or the inhabitants of Nahalol; but the Canaanites lived among them, and became subject to forced labor.

Asher did not drive out the inhabitants of Acco, or the inhabitants of Sidon, or of Ahlab, or of Achzib, or of Helbah, or of Aphik, or of Rehob; but the Asherites lived among the Canaanites, the inhabitants of the land; for they did not drive them out.

Naphtali did not drive out the inhabitants of Beth-shemesh, or the inhabitants of Beth-anath, but lived among the Canaanites, the inhabitants of the land; nevertheless the inhabitants of Beth-shemesh and of Beth-anath became subject to forced labor for them. (*Judg 1:19–33*)

In the subsequent periods many Canaanites still lived among the Israelites: they were the descendants of those people who had renounced evil cults and had received the Lord and his teaching. For example, King David bought a plot of land, the site of the future Temple, on the holy Mount Moriah from Araunah who belonged to the Jebusites, one of the strongest nations inhabiting Canaan (2 Sam 24:18). After David’s conquest of Jerusalem, Araunah still possessed the land in the holiest place for the Israelites:

Araunah said, “Why has my lord the king come to his servant?” David said, “To buy the threshing floor from you in order to build an altar to the Lord, so that the plague may be averted from the people.”

Then Araunah said to David, “Let my lord the king take and offer up what seems good to him; here are the oxen for the burnt offering, and the threshing sledges and the yokes of the oxen for the wood.

All this, O king, Araunah gives to the king.” And Araunah said to the king, “May the Lord your God respond favorably to you.”

But the king said to Araunah, “No, but I will buy them from you for a price; I will not offer burnt offerings to the Lord my God that cost me nothing.” So David bought the threshing floor and the oxen for fifty shekels of silver. (*2 Sam 24:21–24*)

Araunah the Jebusite wants God’s mercy to descend upon David; for the Lord’s sake he tries to give a piece of holy ground to the king without taking a charge, and he burns with desire to offer a sacrifice to the Lord! Such is the

disposition of those people from the nations of Canaan who joined the Lord's covenant with their whole heart, having clearly seen the difference between the light of the true faith and the darkness of pagan delusion.

Already in the time of Joshua aliens from among the Canaanites who joined Israel of their own free will were so numerous that in the description of the solemn ceremony — the reading of the blessings and the curses of the Law — they are mentioned before the citizens:

All Israel, alien as well as citizen, with their elders and officers and their judges, stood on opposite sides of the ark in front of the levitical priests who carried the ark of the covenant of the Lord, half of them in front of Mount Gerizim and half of them in front of Mount Ebal, as Moses the servant of the Lord had commanded at the first, that they should bless the people of Israel. (*Josh 8:33*)

First comes “alien,” and only after him “citizen” is mentioned.

Hence, as far back as the time of Joshua's campaigns the inhabitants of the Holy Land turned to the Lord in great numbers, joined the Israelites to constitute one people with them. This is also proved by the results of archaeological excavations, which demonstrate that the process of the Israelite settlement was gradual and relatively peaceful. Moreover, the Israelites and the Canaanites became related with each other, lived side by side, had common forms of agriculture and cattle-breeding and, finally, merged into a single entity. The prohibition to marry the Canaanites (*Ex 34:15–16*) concerns only those of them who persist in paganism. The same motivation is given in the context of the prohibition:

You shall not make a covenant with the inhabitants of the land, for when they prostitute themselves to their gods and sacrifice to their gods, someone among them will invite you, and you will eat of the sacrifice.

And you will take wives from among their daughters for your sons, and their daughters who prostitute themselves to their gods will make your sons also prostitute themselves to their gods. (*Ex 34:15–16*)

The story that Rahab (Canaanite cult-prostitute in a pagan shrine) told to Joshua's spies in Jericho shows that a great number of Canaanites were prepared by the course of historic events to renounce idolatry and to receive Israel's God:

...And said to the men: “I know that the Lord has given you the land, and that dread of you has fallen on us, and that all the inhabitants of the land melt in fear before you.

For we have heard how the Lord dried up the water of the Red Sea before you when you came out of Egypt, and what you did to the two kings of the Amorites that were beyond the Jordan, to Sihon and Og, whom you utterly destroyed.

As soon as we heard it, our hearts melted, and there was no courage left in any of us because of you. The Lord your God is indeed God in heaven above and on earth below. (*Josh 2:9–11*)

The extraordinary miracles and signs performed by the Most High in Egypt, by the Red Sea and in the Wilderness of Sinai, made such an impression on the nations inhabiting the Holy Land that many of them were ready to repeat Rahab's words: “...there was no courage left in any of us because of you. The Lord your God is indeed God in heaven above and on earth below.” Let us say once again that such Canaanites who joined the Israelites in immense numbers shared the

same rights with “native” inhabitants in the conquered land (Ex 12:49; Lev 19:34, 24:22).

One more question remains for discussion, concerning the meaning of the phrase used in the Scripture with regard to the conquered Canaanite cities: *brc ypl ...vkyv <va-ya`ku... le-phi `charev>* — “attacked... with the edge of the sword.” We find this phrase, for example, in Josh 8:24. The given text speaks of the war against the resisting citizens of Ai, i.e. against the warriors (in Canaan women could be warriors as well; for instance, Astarte, the most prominent goddess of the Canaanites, was always portrayed as a female warrior). However, on another occasion, where the “destruction” of Jericho is spoken of, the superficial reading leaves an impression that all citizens were destroyed, irrespective of sex or age:

Then they devoted to destruction by the edge of the sword all in the city, both men and women, young and old, oxen, sheep, and donkeys. (*Josh 6:21*)

Notice that the Hebrew original of this verse does not mention destruction, but a curse (*brc ypl ...vmyrcyv <va-yachari`mu... le-phi `charev>* — “they made accursed [everything in the city]... by the edge of the sword.” It is said (as in other similar places describing the conquest of the cities) that they “made accursed [everything] under the threat of the edge of the sword,” not that they “destroyed... by the edge of the sword.” The verb *Mrc <cha`ram>* — “to make accursed” — has an original meaning “to expel,” “to ban,” “to seclude,” that is consistent with the instruction concerning *expulsion* of those Canaanites who refused to join the covenant. Jericho and Ai were among the cities that persistently resisted the Israelites regardless of manifest miracles and signs of the Lord (Josh 2:9–11). This testified to the fact that their citizens did not wish to renounce the inhuman Canaanite cults and therefore, together with their herds (Josh 6:21), they were subject to expulsion “under threat of the edge of the sword,” i.e. to “cherem” — “banning,” “excommunication,” “exclusion” from the citizens of the Holy Land. According to the testimony of Josephus Flavius, a famous Jewish historian of the 1st century AD, up to his time in some countries neighboring Judah as well as in some Phoenician colonies located far from Palestine, one could still find stone pillars with inscriptions in the Phoenician (Canaanite) language, saying that they had been erected by those who had fled Joshua’s army.

The same expression, “struck it with the edge of the sword,” is found in Josh 10:30 (cf. Josh 10:28, 32–33, 35, 37, 39). In all these cases the verb *hkyv <va-ya`keh>* is used — “and he struck,” literally, “he hit,” “he broke,” i.e. conquered (the city). As to the citizens who violently opposed him and who had united in order to repel Joshua (Josh 10:3–5, 33), they were driven out, expelled “under threat of the edge of the sword,” i.e. were exposed to “cherem” (Josh 10:28, 35, 37, 39, 40). It is no accident that throughout this excerpt it is emphasized that “he left no one remaining” in every such city (Josh 10:28, 30, 33, 37, 39, 40). In the light of everything that we have said above, this does not imply total extermination of the citizens, but their expulsion.

Of great interest is the testimony of the Scripture concerning the war that the Canaanite kings declared upon those cities, which allied with the Israelites and

renounced pagan practices. Among such cities was the city of Gibeon, of which we learn that it

...Was a large city, like one of the royal cities, and was larger than Ai, and all its men were warriors. (*Josh 10:2*)

In such cases, the cities that joined the covenant with the Lord turned to the Israelites for help (*Josh 10:6*). Very interesting documents proving this story were discovered in the royal archive of Tell el-Amarna, Egypt. The Canaanite kings, vying with one another, wrote letters to pharaoh, in which they asked protection from “the Habiru,” which can easily be identified with Myrbi *iv`rim* — “the Hebrews.” The pharaoh, however, refused aid, as one could expect in the light of the events, described in the Bible — the ten plagues that had come down upon Egypt and death of the pharaoh’s predecessor in the Red Sea. These letters from Tell el-Amarna belong to the period of Joshua’s conquest of the Holy Land. However, one detail mentioned in the correspondence is of special importance for us: it appears that a vast number of Canaanites sided with “the Habiru,” especially those of them who were the poorest and the most oppressed. They “opened the city gates” before “the Habiru,” rising against their own rulers! This fact can be easily explained from a psychological point of view, if we compare the rights that were granted to slaves and to the poor by God’s Law, with the rights of the same social groups in the city-states of Canaan, where human sacrifices were practiced. Even the king of Tyre, whose lands were not the object of the Israelites’ invasion, wrote to pharaoh that fearing “the Habiru” and those local farmers who sided with them, he cannot leave the city where he is shut “like a bird in a cage.” The ruler of Jerusalem (“Uru-Shalayim”) Abdi-hepa (“Hepa’s slave,” which points to the connection of the bearer of this name with the nation of the Hivites — *yvc <hi`vi>*; see *Ex 23:28*) writes to the pharaoh: “Let the king know everything: the lands are being destroyed, people are rising against me. The regions of Gezer, Ashkelon and the mountains of Lachish gave them [i.e. “the Habiru”] food, oil and everything necessary... This was done by Miliku and the sons of Laba’ya, who give the king’s land to the Habiru...” The second letter of the same Abdi-hepa is still more “hopeless”: “Let the king take care of his land [the Canaanite rulers were often Egypt’s vassals]... The region of Seir up to Granate opposes me, Carmel is lost... The Habiru are appropriating royal cities, and not a single governor is left [to the pharaoh]...”

Thus, we see that the Israelite settlement of the Holy Land was largely supported by the oppressed part of local population.

“Well,” someone can object, “we have been convinced that there was not such a thing as total extermination of local population. We even agree that the Canaanites who joined the Israelites enjoyed the same rights. Nevertheless, there are two more questions to consider: for what reason were these Canaanites, who chose to keep their religious beliefs, driven out from their own cities? And why their kings were executed, as is quite clear from the Scripture (*Josh 8:29; 10:1, 22–30; 12:7–24*)?”

There is only one possible answer. Already to Abraham a promise was given that after oppression in a foreign land his descendants would return to the Holy Land:

And they shall come back here in the fourth generation; for the iniquity of the Amorites is not yet complete. (*Gen 15:16*)

The last words deserve special attention: it is said that "...the iniquity [Hebrew Nvi <a`von> — "sin"] of the Amorites [the latter word denotes here all the inhabitants of Canaan] is not yet complete". This means that there is a certain "limit" of iniquity and sin, and if a person or a whole people overstep it, they are destined to bear severe punishment. In the days of Abraham there were still many righteous people in the land of Canaan, who listened to the preaching of the great patriarch and were eager to obey God's will. Some of them were in "union" — religious covenant — with God and with Abraham's clan and some joined the patriarch's family (cf. Gen 14:13, 18–20; 17:12). However, archaeological and historical data show that as early as the time of Abraham the most abominable cults of all that existed in that epoch and later began to spread. These were satanic cults, as we would call them today. They reached their fullest development by the time of the Israelite Exodus from Egypt, as it had been predicted in the prophetic vision given to Abraham (Gen 15:16). It was by the time of the arriving of Abraham's descendants in the Holy Land that the iniquity of its inhabitants was close to being complete... The worship of Baal, Astarte, Molech and other gods was linked with human sacrifice, especially with the sacrifice of children in the fire, including one's own firstborn:

You must not do the same for the Lord your God, because every abhorrent thing that the Lord hates they have done for their gods. They would even burn their sons and their daughters in the fire to their gods. (*Deut 12:31*)

God's Law prohibited such actions and demanded the death of anyone who was involved in this practice:

Say further to the people of Israel: Any of the people of Israel, or of the aliens who reside in Israel, who give any of their offspring to Molech shall be put to death; the people of the land shall stone them to death.

I myself will set my face against them, and will cut them off from the people, because they have given of their offspring to Molech, defiling my sanctuary and profaning my holy name.

And if the people of the land should ever close their eyes to them, when they give of their offspring to Molech, and do not put them to death, I myself will set my face against them and against their family, and will cut them off from among their people, them and all who follow them in prostituting themselves to Molech. (*Lev 20:2–5*)

For ages human sacrifice was also practiced by the Phoenicians, the Moabites and other nations neighboring the Holy Land.

In addition, temple prostitutes, male and female, were an integral part of Canaanite religion. They had sex with each other and with people coming to the shrines, by the "sacred poles" and in the "sanctuaries" (*Lev 20:6; Deut 23:17; 1 Kings 14:24, 15:12; Isa 57:3* etc.). All kinds of black magic were also widely spread among the nations of Canaan that tightly connected all the population of the country, from little children to old people, with dark, unclean, demonic spirits:

No one shall be found among you who makes a son or a daughter pass through fire, or who practices divination, or is a soothsayer, or an augur, or a sorcerer, or one who casts spells, or who consults ghosts or spirits, or who seeks oracles from the dead.

For whoever does these things is abhorrent to the Lord; it is because of such abhorrent practices that the Lord your God is driving them out before you. (*Deut 18:10–12*)

The land of Canaan became indeed the stronghold of evil: of bloodshed, cult prostitution, black magic, and misanthropy of all kinds...

What was the original plan of Providence concerning the Holy Land? From the most ancient times it was prepared for the people of God — the descendants of Shem (Gen 9:26) as a place from which the purest knowledge of God would emanate, as a place of the future birth of Messiah, a place where “a priestly kingdom and a holy nation” (Ex 19:6, Isa 2:3, Mic 5:2) would abide. Talking over the Third Day of creation, we paid attention to the fact that “the dry land” mentioned in Gen 1:9–10 designates the original single continent, the shape of which is now being reconstructed on the basis of various data, including the outline of present continents that once separated. In the very center of this primordial continent was the Holy Land, which until now is situated at the meeting-point of three continents: Europe, Asia and Africa. In this the providential design concerning “the holy center” of the Earth was revealed, for it is from there that the knowledge of God was to spread to all the corners of the world:

Thus says the Lord God: This is Jerusalem; I have set her in the center of the nations, with countries all around her. (*Ezek 5:5*)

When the lands and the countries were divided among the descendants of Noah, this land, according to a legend, was given to the descendants of Shem; however, the sons of Ham conquered it and unlawfully forced out the Semites beyond its bounds (Gen 10:15–31). The Most High permitted the Canaanites who were the descendants of Ham to possess this land, watching if they would serve him, if they would agree to become his servants. According to the prophecy spoken through the forefather Noah, the Canaanites always face an option: whether to serve God or to serve Shem, whose children will repossess the Holy Land in case “the iniquity” of the sons of Ham “is complete.” It is said through Noah:

“Blessed by the Lord my God be Shem; and let Canaan be his slave.” (*Gen 9:26*)

This is exactly what happened: the iniquity was complete and the Israelites, the descendants of Shem, regained the heritage of their forefather, who was a priest among the sons of Noah. Thus, the Holy Land once again started performing the duties that had been entrusted to it. It was the first country that had to cleanse itself from the most repulsive forms of idolatry that had developed in it because of the resistance of unclean spirits (Ezek 28:1, Eph 6:12).

...However, let us go back to the question concerning those kings that were killed by Joshua’s warriors. They acted as chief priests of those city-states that were governed by them, that is, they were immediate initiators of bloodshed going

on in pagan shrines: with their own hands they murdered numerous infants, children and grown-ups who were offered as sacrifices to their bloodthirsty deities. The custom of child sacrifice performed by the king was still in effect, for example, in Moab centuries later:

When the king of Moab saw that the battle was going against him, he took with him seven hundred swordsmen to break through, opposite the king of Edom; but they could not.

Then he took his firstborn son who was to succeed him, and offered him as a burnt offering on the wall. And great wrath came upon Israel, so they withdrew from him and returned to their own land. (2 Kings 3:26–27)

These kings–priests were direct mediators between their own nation and unclean spirits; their authority was based on black magic and was supported by it (cf. Deut 32:16–17). It is clear that they resisted the spreading of genuine faith most vigorously and obstinately. Not in the slightest were they ready to submit themselves to Joshua son of Nun (Josh 10:1–4). In various places on the territory of Palestine and Syria, especially under the foundations of city walls, archaeologists discovered jars with the bones of children who had been offered as sacrifices. Thus, execution of the Canaanite kings, who were butchers, sorcerers and infanticides, was God’s just punishment; it was carried out in accordance with the direct instructions of the Lord (Deut 7:24–25). This execution turned out a blessing for the nations that suffered under those brutal tyrants.

Thus we have seen that the “destruction,” mentioned in the Torah and in the Book of Joshua with regard to the Canaanite city-states, by no means designates “total extermination” of their inhabitants, but the destruction of ungodly state system, the abolition of demonic idolatry and punishment of the kings-priests whose hands were constantly stained with human blood. Those citizens who agreed to submit to the Lord’s will joined the Israelites, those who did not agree were expelled from the Holy Land. The same expulsion can befall even the Israelites if they fall away from the Lord in future:

But just as all the good things that the Lord your God promised concerning you have been fulfilled for you, so the Lord will bring upon you all the bad things, until he has destroyed you from this good land that the Lord your God has given you.

If you transgress the covenant of the Lord your God, which he enjoined on you, and go and serve other gods and bow down to them, then the anger of the Lord will be kindled against you, and you shall perish quickly from the good land that he has given to you. (*Josh 23:15–16*)

It is evident that the expression “until he has destroyed you from this good land” implies expulsion of the people, just as it happened later in history, not its total extermination. In the same way the Lord “drove out,” “expelled” the Canaanites from before the Israelites, he did not “exposed them to genocide,” according to those commentators who do not go carefully into the Scriptures or do not want to. It is clearly stated that

...The Lord has driven out before you great and strong nations; and as for you, no one has been able to withstand you to this day.

One of you puts to flight a thousand, since it is the Lord your God who fights for you, as he promised you. (*Josh 23:9–10*)

Hence, with God's help, on the basis of the Holy Scripture we refuted the horrible myth according to which the Most High allegedly demanded "the total extermination" of the Canaanites, encouraged "genocide" against them. Therefore, we deprived the opponents of biblical truth of their favorite argument concerning the alleged "injustice" of the Lord's judgment and the "inhumanity" of the precepts of God's Law.

However, let us go back to the Book of Exodus.

...You shall worship the Lord your God, and I will bless your bread and your water; and I will take sickness away from among you. (*Ex 23:25*)

"The blessing of bread and water," mentioned here, means that God will impart such properties to the food, which are most useful for the body, and therefore help one to get rid of sicknesses. The Lord will fulfill this blessing if the people serve him alone, if they direct all their efforts to doing his will. The Hebrew text of the last part of this verse *Kbrqm hlcm ytrshv <va-hasi`roti macha`la mikir`becha>* may be interpreted in two ways: either as "I will take sickness away from among you" or as "I will take sickness away from inside you." In the latter case, we see a specific connection between the purification of one's inner world from wickedness on the one hand and disappearance of sicknesses, which result from sin, on the other.

No one shall miscarry or be barren in your land; I will fulfill the number of your days. (*Ex 23:26*)

This verse proves that both the spontaneous abortion (miscarriage) and barrenness are the consequences of sinful deeds. Sins have a fatal effect not only on those who commit them, but also on their descendants (cf. *Ex 20:5*) By his sins a person can reduce the "number of his days" that have been destined for him, and by his righteous deeds he can "fulfill" them. Already in the Fifth Commandment it is said that our days can be made long if we honor our parents (*Ex 20:12*). A sincere repentance before God can increase the duration of one's life, as we can read in the Book of Isaiah about King Hezekiah:

Then the word of the Lord came to Isaiah:  
"Go and say to Hezekiah, Thus says the Lord, the God of your ancestor David: I have heard your prayer, I have seen your tears; I will add fifteen years to your life... (*Isa 38:4-5*)

The longevity can be a reward for one's righteous way of life, as David's Psalms say:

When they call to me, I will answer them; I will be with them in trouble, I will rescue them and honor them.  
With long life I will satisfy them, and show them my salvation. (*Ps 91:15-16*)

cf. *Ps 92:12-15*.

The gift of long life is connected with three aspects: first, with the love for God, i.e. complete devotion to him; then, with obeying his commands; and last, with holding fast to him, i.e. with reaching spiritual unity with him, with gaining

the Holy Spirit. These three aspects of righteousness are listed in the Book of Deuteronomy in connection with the promise of longevity:

...Choose life so that you and your descendants may live,  
Loving the Lord your God, obeying him, and holding fast to him; for that means  
life to you and length of days, so that you may live in the land that the Lord swore to  
give to you ancestors, to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob. (*Deut 30:19–20*)

Choosing the right way a person finds wisdom that allows him to accomplish his earthly mission in its fullness, and for this purpose one often needs a long life:

My child, do not forget my teaching, but let your heart keep my commandments;  
For length of days and years of life and abundant welfare they will give you.  
(*Prov 3:1–2*)

On the other hand, the Scripture speaks of the premature death of the wicked that often die in the midst of their days:

But you, O God, will cast them down into the lowest pit; the bloodthirsty and  
treacherous shall not live out half their days. But I will trust in you. (*Ps 55:23*)

King David pleads with the Most High for the “fullness of days” and for being spared from the fate of the wicked:

“O my God,” I say, “do not take me away at the mid-point of my life, you whose  
years endure throughout all generations.” (*Ps 102:24*)

Thus, here the text (*Ex 23:25–26*) emphasizes the fact that the life of an individual and of the whole people depends solely on their attitude toward God and his Law. All the victories of the people of God over their enemies are linked with this as well:

I will send my terror in front of you, and will throw into confusion all the people  
against whom you shall come, and I will make all your enemies turn their backs to  
you... (*Ex 23:27*)

Indeed, so often success in warfare is conditioned not by the strength of the army or its skill, but by some seemingly accidental reasons! Everyone who studies the history of war craft ponders this problem. However, in all such “accidents” the hidden will of Providence, that governs the destiny of the nations and the general course of history, manifests itself. “Terror” (Heb. *mya* *‘ei`ma*), that is mentioned here, stands for a certain psychological state of enemy soldiers: depression and panic that seize everyone all of a sudden. Thus, the Lord himself deprives them of the ability to resist. Such cases were frequent in the history of Israel’s wars when the nation was faithful to the Lord. For example, during the period of the judges, under Gideon’s rule, the Lord inspired the Midianites and the Amalekites, Israel’s enemies, with such fear that they suddenly began to fight with each other and shamefully fled the battle-field:

When they blew the three hundred trumpets, the Lord set every man’s sword  
against his fellow and against all the army; and the army fled... (*Judg 7:22*)

In the time of King Saul the Lord granted his faithful servants, the king's son Jonathan and his armor-bearer, the victory over the big garrison of the Philistines:

In that first slaughter Jonathan and his armor-bearer killed about twenty men within an area about half a furrow long in an acre of land.

There was a panic in the camp, in the field, and among all the people; the garrison and even the raiders trembled; the earth quaked; and it became a very great panic. (*1 Sam 14:14-15*)

The Lord gives the following promise concerning the future victories of the Israelites over the enemy, provided that they keep righteousness:

...And I will send the pestilence in front of you, which shall drive out the Hivites, the Canaanites, and the Hittites from before you. (*Ex 23:28*)

The word "pestilence" used in the English text translates Hebrew *hix* *<tsi`ra>*, a "hornet" — a poisonous flying insect whose sting is very painful. A swarm of hornets is indeed capable of scaring a whole body of troops. This promise has one more interesting aspect. Shortly before the Exodus of the Israelites from Egypt the Canaanite city-states became the objects of Egyptians' conquests, and many of them, as we have already mentioned, passed under Egyptian control. At that time a hornet was a Pharaoh's symbol and its images were placed on standards and chariots. For that reason, the Lord's words concerning hornets "which shall drive out" the Canaanites "in front of you," may apply to the Egyptian armies that have weakened the nations of Canaan, having made them more vulnerable for Israel's invasion.

Next comes the prophecy about the gradual conquest of the Promised Land. The slowness of this process is explained by significant historical and natural reasons:

I will not drive them out from before you in one year, or the land would become desolate and the wild animals would multiply against you.

Little by little I will drive them out from before you, until you have increased and possess the land. (*Ex 23:29-30*)

The Israelites were told not to drive out the nations inhabiting the Canaan completely: a great part of them, as we have seen, attached themselves to the Israelites, having adopted faith in true God. As for the rest, they were not conquered at once, but up to the time of the judges and even the kings, vast areas of Palestine were still occupied by them (*Judg 1:19-36, 2 Sam 5:6-7*). There were several reasons for that. First, neither of the generations of the Israelites before David was obedient enough to God's will so as to gain a complete victory over all heathen nations of the Holy Land. The Most High intentionally left a certain number of the Canaanites in the land, so that the people of God might learn to lead both a spiritual fight — for the faith, and a physical one — for the sake of their survival. The heathen nations were the instrument of testing Israel's steadfastness in obeying the commandments:

Now these are the nations that the Lord left to test all those in Israel who had no experience of any war in Canaan (it was only that successive generations of Israelites might know war, to teach those who had no experience of it before)...

<...>

They were for the testing of Israel, to know whether Israel would obey the commandments of the Lord, which he commanded their ancestors by Moses. (*Judg 3:1–4*)

Finally, there is one more important reason mentioned in the given excerpt of the Book of Exodus. If we understand the words concerning the multiplication of “the wild animals” literally, then the fact that the Canaanites inhabited Palestine prevented the land from becoming desolate and averted the multiplication of wild animals (lions, wolves, snow leopards, bears etc.), which did much harm to the cattle-breeders. If we understand these words figuratively, i.e. if we take into consideration the fact that these wild animals could often stand for the “wild” heathen kingdoms (cf. Ps 22:13, 16; 74:18–19; Ezek 29:3; Dan 7:3–7), then we can conclude that these Canaanite, Hittite and Syrian (Aramaean) petty states served as a buffer between Israel and the aggressive kingdoms of Mesopotamia. They did not let “the wild animals” attack the settlements of the Jews that were still vulnerable. The borders of the Jewish kingdom in the time of its future flowering are determined in the following verse:

I will set your borders from the Red Sea to the sea of the Philistines, and from the wilderness to the Euphrates; for I will hand over to you the inhabitants of the land, and you shall drive them out before you. (*Ex 23:31*)

However, such borders are promised providing people stay faithful to their covenant with God (cf. Num 34:2–12). The Red Sea, or the “Sea of Reeds” (Pvs My <*yam Soof*>), which the Jews crossed dry-shod, is situated between the eastern parts of Egypt and the Sinai Peninsula. Therefore, even the territory of Sinai is promised here to the people of God. In fact, it never belonged to them even partially, and this is probably connected with their insufficient zeal in obeying God’s commandments. Even in our days, having captured this territory as a result of the Six-Day War of 1967 and retaining it for a number of years, Israel, according to the peace treaty with Egypt, was forced to return it to its neighbor.

“The sea of the Philistines” stands for the Mediterranean Sea, for the major cities of the Philistines were situated not far from its coast. For a long time the Jews could not capture these cities. “From the Red Sea to the sea of the Philistines” — such is the width of the Holy Land. As for its length, it should stretch “from the wilderness to the Euphrates”: “the wilderness” is the Arabian desert (the very word *hbri <ara`va>* means “desert,” hence, *ybri <ara`vi>* is “the inhabitant of the desert,” “the Arabian,” “the Arab”). As to the river, in the biblical usage *rhnh <ha-na`har>* (literally, “this stream,” “this river” — with a definite article *h <ha>*) indeed means the Euphrates, the largest and the most well-known river of the region. However, here the word *rhn <na`har>* can imply another large river (although inferior to the Euphrates) — the Jordan. Therefore, if the Israelites are wholly faithful to God’s will, they will be rewarded with a territory of which the Euphrates is an eastern border. If they violate the commandments, then the river Jordan will be this border, and the territory of the country will be much less...

For that reason, after several grave cases when the people renounced the Lord in the wilderness, it is the Jordan and not the Euphrates that is definitely called the eastern boundary of the land:

... And the boundary shall go down to the Jordan, and its end shall be at the Dead Sea. This shall be your land with its boundaries all around. (*Num 34:12*)

Only in the time of David and Solomon the boundary of Israel came close to the river Euphrates (1 Kings 4:21): it was the age of the people's maximum faithfulness to their covenant with the Lord, but as soon as they began to swerve, the boundaries got narrow again.

This happens in the life of every one of us: the promises given to us by the Lord are linked with our faithfulness to the covenant. A different fate awaits us depending on what kind of life we lead — a righteous or a wicked one. The boundaries of spiritual and physical existence of those who turn aside from the Fountain of life get narrower all the time. In their lives, the words told by God through the prophet Jeremiah come true:

...For my people have committed two evils: they have forsaken me, the fountain of living water, and dug out cisterns for themselves, cracked cisterns that can hold no water. (*Jer 2:13*)

In case the people of God lead a righteous life, when (and if) the borders of the kingdom are expanded to the limits set by the verse under consideration (Ex 23:31), they will be able to drive the Canaanites out completely, without detriment to themselves. Once again, the main prohibition concerning the Canaanites is repeated at the end of the chapter:

... You shall make no covenant with them and their gods.  
They shall not live in your land, or they will make you sin against me; for if you worship their gods, it will surely be a snare to you. (*Ex 23:32–33*)

This prohibition refers to those heathens who remained faithful to their evil cults, not to those who turned to God. This becomes still more obvious from the fact that the phrase “their gods” is used here twice.

Now let us turn to the contents of Chapter 24, in which the mysteries of God's appearance are revealed. Not only Moses, but also the priests and the elders who accompanied him, become witnesses of a great event:

Then he said to Moses, “Come up to the Lord, you and Aaron, Nadab, and Abihu, and seventy of the elders of Israel, and worship at a distance.  
Moses alone shall come near the Lord and all the ordinances; but the others shall not come near, and the people shall not come up with him.” (*Ex 24:1–2*)

These verses describe the division of the people into various spiritual “categories.” Each of these categories is on a certain stage of development with regard to the supreme world and therefore adapts itself to the perception of truth in its own way. The common people who belonged neither to the Aaronic priests nor to the elders were prohibited earlier to go up the mountain of the Lord or even to touch it Ex 19:12–13). The holy mountain symbolizes the spiritual world, which is invisible, like Jacob's ladder (Gen 28:12–16). The Lord dwells on its top, and going up this mountain stands for the path of life of a righteous person, the ascension of his spirit in the course of his life:

For the wise the path of life leads upward, in order to avoid Sheol below. (*Prov 15:24*)

However, in order to “dwell” or to “stay” on this mountain or even to move toward its top, one needs to have a heart in which the truth dwells:

O Lord, who may abide in your tent? Who may dwell on your holy hill?  
Those who walk blamelessly, and do what is right, and speak the truth from their heart... (*Ps 15:1-2*)

It is clear that the overwhelming majority of the people who were led out from Egypt did not belong to the righteous persons of this kind and did not have the qualities listed in Psalm 15:

...Who do not slander with their tongue, and do no evil to their friends, nor take up a reproach against their neighbors;  
In whose eyes the wicked are despised, but who honor those who fear the Lord; who stand by their oath even to their hurt; who do not lend money at interest, and do not take a bribe against the innocent.  
Those who do these things shall never be moved. (*Ps 15:3-5*)

Only those pure in heart (Mt 5:8) can hope for “seeing God.” The ascension of the holy mountain must be preceded by the purification of one’s heart: a person should first perceive himself as spiritually poor – “poor in spirit,” possessing nothing but expecting to get everything from the Lord. Then he must fully repent of his transgressions and bemoan them. After that, he is to gain a genuine meekness before God and men, to start being thirsty for the truth, i.e. for the justice, and for the vindication at God’s trial, like one thirsts for water in a hot wilderness. Finally, a person must be filled with mercy, i.e. with love for everyone, in order to receive mercy. Only after all that his heart will be purified, and he will be able to go up the holy mountain in order to “see God.” In such sequence, the stages of the spiritual purification are listed by Jesus Christ in the Sermon on the Mount (Mt 5:2-8).

The people which had been in slavery for several generations, first had to receive the rudimentary knowledge of God’s Law. As we have read, they needed to be warned against murder, stealing, adultery, fights, abusing widows and orphans (Ex 21-23). It is evident that the people were far from even the first step of purification that consists in realizing one’s spiritual poverty. In such a state any ascension of the Lord’s mountain was out of the question: anyone who dares to encroach upon the holy things being defiled is severely struck (Ex 19:13, Lev 10:1-3).

Another spiritual “group” consisted of Aaron, the future high priest, his sons Nadab and Abihu, who also were to become priests in future (but later lost this right along with their earthly life for a certain sin — see Lev 10:1-2), and the elders who, already from the time of the patriarchs, passed the sacred knowledge about the Creator and his covenant from generation to generation. These people were internally prepared for going up the mountain, but still they were to “contemplate God” from a distance, not approaching him, unlike Moses (Ex 19:2, 14). In the New Testament age we can also find such spiritually prepared, chosen, people. They are awarded with the knowledge of God’s mysteries and, unlike “Gentiles who are turning to God” (Acts 15:19), they are called “mature” (Col 1:28, Heb 5:14. A Greek word *teleioj* <`*teleios*> means “perfect,” “superior,” “initiate,” “completed,” “whole”). Concerning such people the apostle Paul says:

Yet among the mature we do speak wisdom, though it is not a wisdom of this age or of the rulers of this age, who are doomed to perish.

But we speak God's wisdom, secret and hidden, which God decreed before the ages for our glory. (*1 Cor 2:6-7*)

Finally, only Moses, who occupies the highest spiritual step (Num 12:6-8), has a right to draw near the Lord.

Many works of world art are devoted to Moses' communing with God on the mountain. One of them is the poem by Ivan Bunin:

The Torah

The poem follows...

Legendary details mentioned in this poem are taken from Haggadah...

Moses came and told the people all the words of the Lord and all the ordinances; and all the people answered with one voice, and said, "All the words that the Lord has spoken we will do." (*Ex 24:3*)

The people repeat the words that they once already said in response to God's call (Ex 19:8; cf. Deut 5:27). On both occasions they pledge themselves to obey the Lord on behalf of those who live now and on behalf of all future generations (Deut 29:14-15).

And Moses wrote down all the words of the Lord. He rose early in the morning, and built an altar at the foot of the mountain, and set up twelve pillars, corresponding to the twelve tribes of Israel. (*Ex 24:4*)

The first part of this verse is important to us for it contains the evidence showing that it was Moses who gradually put into writing the whole text of the Torah.

Let us trace how the Torah was gradually written down by Moses. What evidence do we find in other Scriptures? For the first time the recording of the events "in a book" (i.e. in the Torah which was being created by the inspiration of the Spirit of God) is mentioned in the same Book of Exodus:

Then the Lord said to Moses, "Write this as a reminder in a book and recite it in the hearing of Joshua: I will utterly blot out the remembrance of Amalek from under heaven." (*Ex 17:14*)

It follows from the given text that all events preceding the Exodus had been already recorded, and the war with the Amalekites was to be written down in a scroll, in a certain place, following everything that preceded it. At the same time, it is clear that the events relating to the Exodus could be described only after the narration concerning the Egyptian bondage of the Israelites. As for the latter, it should have been preceded by the story of their settlement in the land, which, in its turn, should have gone after the whole history of the patriarchs, starting with Adam. As to the creation of Adam, it can be perceived only in the context of the story of the Six Days of Creation. Hence, the whole contents of the Book of

Genesis and this part of the Book of Exodus that precedes the description of the victory over Amalek, had been earlier put into writing by Moses.

Another place that points to the record of the next portion of the Torah is the one that we have just read: “And Moses wrote down all the words of the Lord...” It is clear from the context that the meaning here is, at least, the Ten Commandments and the contents of Chapters 21–23, which include direct commands, i.e. “the words of the Lord.” Indeed, the Ten Commandments must have been set forth in connection with the description of those circumstances that accompanied their declaration by God himself. Therefore, this place (Ex 24:4) hints at Moses’ recording of all events starting with the victory over Amalek up to the first part of the Sinaitic revelation (Ex 17:14 – 24:4).

However, some Bible critics are confused by the fact that Moses everywhere except for several places of the Book of Deuteronomy (e.g. Deut 1:9, 12; 14–16; 18 etc., where first person pronoun is used) speaks of himself in the third person. On these grounds they even object to Mosaic authorship. It should be pointed out that speaking of oneself in the third person is characteristic of many literary texts of the Ancient Near East. The kings of Sumer and Akkad, Babylon and Assyria, the Hittite empire and Phoenicia speak of themselves in this way. This form of narration is frequently found in various places of the Holy Scriptures. For example, answering Esau’s question — “Who are these with you?” — Jacob says:

“The children whom God has graciously given your servant.” (*Gen 33:5*)

Such usage of the third person while speaking of oneself, according to the ethical norms of that age, stressed the humbleness of the one who spoke and his respect for one’s associates (cf. Gen 44:7, 1 Kings 1:17 etc.) Concerning Moses the Scripture says:

Now the man Moses was very humble, more so than anyone else on the face of the earth. (*Num 12:3*)

This is why Moses continually uses third person pronouns while speaking of himself. There is one more reason for that — incomparably greater significance of that ykna *ʿAno`chi*, I, that stands for the Lord himself, beside which there is no place left for the human “I,” even if belongs to the greatest mediator between God and the people — Moses...

Where does the text describe further record of the Torah after inscription of the Ten Commandments on the tablets (Ex 34:28)? The story of the people’s wandering in the wilderness forms the larger part of the contents of the Torah. The writing down of these events is mentioned in the Book of Numbers:

Moses wrote down their starting points, stage by stage, by command of the Lord; and these are their stages... (*Num 33:2*)

Notice that any recording was done only by God’s command, being inspired by the Holy Spirit:

...Because no prophecy ever came by human will, but men and women moved by the Holy Spirit spoke from God. (*2 Pet 1:21*)

Hence, in the Book of Numbers we find evidence of the recording of all the events following Moses' ascension of Mount Sinai up to the dividing of the lands east of the Jordan between the tribes of Reuben, Gad and Manasseh (Ex 24:4 – Num 33:2). The rest of the text was being put down stage by stage until Moses' death. For example, there is evidence of the Lord's direct command concerning the recording of the "song of Moses," which contains a prophecy relating to the Israel's future history:

Now therefore write this song, and teach it to the Israelites; put it in their mouths, in order that this song may be a witness for me against the Israelites. (*Deut 31:19*)

Still earlier the major part of the Torah ("this law") was written down and given to the levitical priests and the elders who were supposed to preserve it:

Then Moses wrote down this law, and gave it to the priests, the sons of Levi, who carried the ark of the covenant of the Lord, and to all the elders of Israel. (*Deut 31:9*)

The only thing that Moses had to do now was to put down the above-mentioned "song," which can be found in Chapter 32 of Deuteronomy:

That very day Moses wrote this song and taught it to the Israelites. (*Deut 31:22*)

Finally, Moses finished writing down the whole Torah "to the very end":

When Moses had finished writing down in a book the words of this law to the very end,

Moses commanded the Levites who carried the ark of the covenant of the Lord, saying,

"Take this book of the law and put it beside the ark of the covenant of the Lord your God; let it remain there as a witness against you. (*Deut 31:24–26*)

As to the last part of the Torah, which contains the description of Moses' death, there are two points of view. According to one legend, it was put down by Joshua, who thus finished the text of the whole Pentateuch, according to another one, it was Moses himself. The latter does not seem impossible considering the fact that Moses described in detail the future events, which happened several millennia later...

Torah is mentioned in the book of Deuteronomy as one complete Book that was to be given to the future king, who was to read it and to correlate his actions with it:

When he [the king] has taken the throne of his kingdom, he shall have a copy of this law written for him in the presence of the levitical priests.

It shall remain with him and he shall read in it all the days of his life, so that he may learn to fear the Lord his God, diligently observing all the words of this law and these statutes... (*Deut 17:18–19*)

As such, the Torah is referred to in the Book of Joshua:

This book of the law shall not depart out of your mouth; you shall meditate on it day and night, so that you may be careful to act in accordance with all that is written

in it. For then you shall make your way prosperous, and then you shall be successful. (*Josh 1:8*)

cf. Josh 22:5.

It is a copy of the Torah that was written on the stones by Joshua (probably, he wrote a copy of the most important commandments), according to the Lord's instruction given through Moses (Deut 27:2–8):

And there, in the presence of the Israelites, Joshua wrote on the stones a copy of the law of Moses, which he had written. (*Josh 8:32*)

Moses' successor read the Torah before all the people:

And afterward he read all the words of the law, blessings and curses, according to all that is written in the book of the law.

There was not a word of all that Moses commanded that Joshua did not read before all the assembly of Israel, and the women, and the little ones, and the aliens who resided among them. (*Josh 8:34–35*)

The Book of Joshua, which describes the conquest of Canaan and which was compiled by Joshua himself, was included “in the book of the Torah of God,” i.e. it was written down in a scroll after the already existing Torah:

Joshua wrote these words in the book of the law of God; and he took a large stone, and set it up there under the oak in the sanctuary of the Lord. (*Josh 24:26*)

The Law of God given through Moses, which was written in full and had the highest, the holiest authority, from this time onwards was known in all the periods of Israel's history. For example, King David just before his death gives to his successor Solomon the following admonition:

“I am about to go the way of all the earth. Be strong, be courageous, and keep the charge of the Lord your God, walking in his ways and keeping his statutes, his commandments, his ordinances, and his testimonies, as is written in the law of Moses, so that you may prosper in all that you do and wherever you turn. (*1 Kings 2:2–3*)

Under David's descendants who ruled over Judah the Torah was well-known. For example, regulations relating to sacrifices and duties of the priests in the Jerusalem Temple were in keeping with the prescriptions of the Torah:

Jehoiada assigned the care of the house of the Lord to the levitical priests whom David had organized to be in charge of the house of the Lord, to offer burnt offerings to the Lord, as is written in the law of Moses, with rejoicing and with singing, according to the order of David. (*2 Chr 23:18*)

Literal quotations from the Law of God can be found in the historic books of the Scripture. For instance, King Amaziah, having taken vengeance on those who had murdered his father Joash,

...Did not put their children to death, according to what is written in the law, in the book of Moses, where the Lord commanded, “The parents shall not be put to death for the children, of the children be put to death for the parents; but all shall be put to death for their own sins.” (*2 Chr 25:4*)

Under the rule of the righteous King Hezekiah temple worship was restored according to the ordinances of God's Torah:

The contribution of the king from his own possessions was for the burnt offerings: the burnt offerings of morning and evening, and the burnt offerings for the Sabbaths, the new moons, and the appointed festivals, as it is written in the law of the Lord.

He commanded the people who lived in Jerusalem to give the portion due to the priests and the Levites, so that they might devote themselves to the law of the Lord. (*2 Chr 31:3*)

The righteous King Josiah also celebrated the Passover in accordance with the law written in the Torah:

They set aside the burnt offerings so that they might distribute them according to the groupings of the ancestral houses of the people, to offer to the Lord, as is written in the book of Moses. And they did the same with the bulls. (*2 Chr 35:12*)

All the prophets who lived before the Babylonian Captivity preach, taking it for granted that the people and the rulers know God's will expressed in the Torah. Isaiah rebukes wicked judges and threatens them with severe punishment from above because they have rejected the Torah:

Therefore, as the tongue of fire devours the stubble, and as dry grass sinks down in the flame, so their root will become rotten, and their blossom go up like dust; for they have rejected the instruction of the Lord of hosts, and have despised the word of the Holy One of Israel. (*Isa 5:24*)

Hosea speaks on behalf of the Lord, mentioning the written Torah as something that everybody knows well:

Though I write for him the multitude of my instructions, they are regarded as a strange thing. (*Hos 8:12*)

Amos speaks of the rejection of the Torah by Jews as a transgression:

Thus says the Lord: For three transgressions of Judah, and for four, I will not revoke the punishment; because they have rejected the law of the Lord... (*Am 2:4*)

In the 6th century BC, not long before the destruction of the Temple by the Babylonians, the prophet Jeremiah proclaims that a great disaster will befall the people due to their opposition to the teaching of the Torah, well known to all the inhabitants of Judah:

Who is wise enough to understand this? To whom has the mouth of the Lord spoken, so that they may declare it? Why is the land ruined and laid waste like a wilderness, so that no one passes through?

And the Lord says: Because they have forsaken my law that I set before them, and have not obeyed my voice, or walked in accordance with it... (*Jer 9:12-13*)

The prophet intentionally stresses that the authorities are familiar with God's Law:

“...Let me go to the rich and speak to them; surely they know the way of the Lord, the law of their God.” But they all alike had broken the yoke, they had burst the bonds. (*Jer 5:5*)

Ezekiel, the younger contemporary of Jeremiah, also prophesies that Israel’s land will be punished exactly for the following fact:

Its priests have done violence to my teaching and have profaned my holy things; they have made no distinctions between the holy and the common, neither have they taught the difference between the unclean and the clean, and they have disregarded my Sabbaths, so that I am profaned among them. (*Ezek 22:26*)

Many places in the Psalter show that the Torah, the Book of the Law, in the time of David was generally held in great respect and the whole nation was familiar with it. For example, Psalm 78 says about the Lord that

He established a decree in Jacob, and appointed a law in Israel, which he commanded our ancestors to teach to their children... (*Ps 78:5*)

Psalm 19 compares God’s Law to the life-giving sun:

Its rising is from the end of the heavens, and its circuit to the end of them; and nothing is hid from its heat.

The law of the Lord is perfect, reviving the soul; the decrees of the Lord are sure, making wise the simple;

The precepts of the Lord are right, rejoicing the heart; the commandment of the Lord is clear, enlightening the eyes... (*Ps 19:6–8*)

Psalm 119 is entirely composed of the verses that sing of the greatness, the perfection and the miracles of God’s Torah:

Open my eyes, so that I may behold wondrous things out of your law. (*Ps 119:18*)

Solomon in his Book of Proverbs speaks of the happiness that results from keeping God’s Law:

Where there is no prophecy, the people cast off restraint, but happy are those who keep the law. (*Prov 29:18*)

There is no need to emphasize that in the post-exilic period of Jewish history the Torah was regarded as of paramount importance in the life of the people. Numerous places of the Holy Scriptures testify to this fact (*Ezra 3:2, 6:18, 7:26; Neh 8:2–8; Dan 9:12–13* etc.). Malachi — the last of the great prophets whose books were included in the Canon — exclaims on behalf of the Lord in the end of his preaching:

Remember the teaching of my servant Moses, the statutes and ordinances that I commanded him at Horeb for all Israel. (*Mal 4:4*)

In the same way, none of the New Testament writers, who were inspired by the Holy Spirit, ever had any doubt as to the Mosaic authorship of the Torah. Jesus Christ repeatedly

testifies to it. For example, answering the question of the Pharisees Jesus alludes to the Law of Moses:

He answered them, "What did Moses command you?"

They said, "Moses allowed a man to write a certificate of dismissal and to divorce her.

But Jesus said to them, "Because of your hardness of heart he wrote this commandment for you..." (*Mk 10:3-5*)

Thus, Jesus and the Synoptic Evangelists unequivocally attested the Mosaic authorship (cf. Mt 19:7-8; Lk 20:37, 24:27). The Evangelist John, Jesus' beloved disciple, also states that

The law indeed was given through Moses... (*Jn 1:17*)

A brief survey of those places of the Scriptures that attest the record of the Torah by Moses, the ancient tradition which has been reverentially kept throughout the centuries and which confirms his authorship, as well as the methods of handing down the text of the Torah by the scribes—sofrim (mentioned in lectures on the Book of Genesis) — all these facts again and again convince us of the invariability, authenticity, completeness and perfection of that the text of the Pentateuch that by God's mercy is until now at our disposal. No disasters, wars, fires, destructions, captivities or expulsions could destroy the main treasure of world culture, the most precious property of the people of Israel, the Church and the whole humanity — the great Book of the Lord!