



### Philo of Alexandria, Decalogue 1-53

Why was the Torah Given in the Desert? *[main points bolded for clarity]*

**To the question why he [Moses] promulgated his laws in the depths of the desert instead of in cities we may answer in the first place that most cities are full of countless evils**, both acts of impiety toward God and wrongdoing between man and man. For everything is debased, the genuine overpowered by the spurious, the true by the specious, which is intrinsically false, but creates impressions whose plausibility serves but to delude. So too in cities there arises that most insidious of foes, Pride [or vanity], admired and worshiped by some who add dignity to vain ideas by means of gold crowns and purple robes and a great establishment of servants and cars, on which these so-called blissful and happy people ride aloft, drawn sometimes by mules and horses, sometimes by men, who bear the heavy burden on their shoulders, yet suffer in soul rather than in body under the weight of extravagant arrogance. [...]

**He [Moses] had also a second object in mind. He who is about to receive the holy laws must first cleanse his soul** and purge away the deep-set stains which it has contracted through contact with the motley, promiscuous horde of men in cities. And to this he cannot attain except by dwelling apart, nor that at once, but only long afterwards, and not till the marks which his old transgressions have imprinted on him have gradually grown faint, melted away and disappeared. [...]

Naturally therefore he first led them away from the highly mischievous associations of cities into the desert, to clear the sins out of their souls, and then began to set the nourishment before their minds—and what should this nourishment be but laws and words of God?

**He had a third reason as follows:** just as men when setting out on a long voyage do not begin to provide sails and rudders and tillers when they have embarked and left the harbor, but equip themselves with enough of the gear needed for the voyage while they are still staying on shore, so **Moses did not think it good that they should just take their portions and settle in cities and then go in quest of laws to regulate their civic life, but rather should first provide themselves with the rules for that life** and gain practice in all that would surely enable the communities to steer their course in safety, **and then settle down to follow from the first the principles of**

justice lying ready for their use, in harmony and fellowship of spirit and rendering to every man his due.

**Some, too, give a fourth reason** which is not out of keeping with the truth but agrees very closely with it. As it was necessary to establish a belief in their minds that the laws were not the inventions of a man but quite clearly the oracles of God, he led the nation a great distance away from cities into the depths of a desert, barren not only of cultivated fruits but also of water fit for drinking, in order that, if after lacking the necessities of life and expecting to perish from hunger and thirst, they suddenly found abundance of sustenance self-produced—when heaven rained the food called manna and the shower of quails from the air to add relish to their food—when the bitter water grew sweet and fit for drinking and springs gushed out of the rock—**they should no longer wonder whether the laws were actually the pronouncements of God, since they had been given the clearest evidence of the truth in the supplies which they had so unexpectedly received in their destitution.** For He who gave abundance of the means of life also bestowed the wherewithal of a good life; for mere life they needed food and drink which they found without making provision; for the good life they needed laws and ordinances which would bring improvement to their souls. These are the reasons suggested to answer the question under discussion: they are but probable surmises; the true reasons are known to God alone.

#### **Thought Questions:**

1. So why was the Torah given in the wilderness?
2. What assumptions does the text make about people who live in cities?
3. Is there a cleansing property about nature or the outdoors?
4. Do we still go into the wilderness to get away from it all?
5. What is the difference between creating something out of nothing and creating something to fit into an already established system?

### **[Midrash] Exodus Rabbah 28:4-6**

“And God spoke all these words, saying” (Exodus 20:1). Rabbi Isaac said: At Mount Sinai the prophets of each and every generation received what they were to prophesy, for Moses told Israel, “But with them that stands here with us this day before Adonai our God, and also with them that are not here with us this day” (Deuteronomy 29:14). [Moses] did not say, “[Those who are] not standing here with us this day,” but “[Those who are] not here with us this day,” a way of referring to souls that are destined to be created. Because as yet these had no substance, Moses did not use the word “standing” for them. Still, even though they did not as yet exist, each one received their share of the Torah. Nor were the future prophets the only ones who received at Sinai the prophecy they were to utter. The sages who were to rise in each and every generation-each and every one of them also received at Sinai the wisdom [Moses] was to utter.

### **Thought Questions:**

1. Why could it be valuable to think or believe that everyone was personally at Mt. Sinai to receive the Torah?
2. Do you feel the Torah is yours? Did you agree to it? Did you agree to be in a covenant with God?
3. Do you feel commanded or obligated to engage in Torah? Why or why not?

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