

Exodus Primer
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Introduction to Exodus

Exodus, the second book in the Torah, begins where Genesis ended—with the children of Israel living in Egypt. The original Hebrew title of the book is “and these are the names,” and the title “Exodus” harkens from the Greek Septuagint, or **LXX**. By the beginning of Exodus, the twelve brothers who settled in Egypt to escape from famine have become a nation suffering in slavery at the hands of the Pharaoh. Exodus tells the story of God’s deliverance of his chosen people from bondage in Egypt, the journey of the Israelites from Egypt to Sinai, and the giving of the law to Moses, laying the foundation for the nation of Israel.

The Book of Exodus

Content

The book of Exodus opens with the children of Israel in bondage in Egypt. Pharaoh attempts to control the Israelite population by enslaving them (1:10ff), having midwives kill baby boys at birth (1:16f), and throwing all the baby boys in the Nile (1:22). When Moses is born to a Levite family, his mother hides him for three months before placing him in a basket in the Nile River where Pharaoh’s daughter finds Moses and adopts him (2:1-10). Moses grows up in Pharaoh’s household, but he flees Egypt after killing an Egyptian taskmaster who had been beating a Hebrew, settling in Midian and living as a shepherd (2:11-16). While tending the flocks of his father in law, Jethro, Moses sees a burning bush and receives his call to return to Egypt and deliver the Israelites from bondage (ch. 3).

Along with his brother Aaron, Moses confronts Pharaoh and demands that Pharaoh release the Israelites. God uses the **ten plagues** to force Pharaoh to release the Israelites, showing himself to be Yahweh—the covenant-keeping God (7:5, 17; 8:22)—while emphasizing his supremacy over the gods of Egypt (12:12). After the first Passover and the death of the firstborn of Egypt, Pharaoh finally agrees to release the Israelites, who leave Egypt under the guidance of Moses. The Israelites escape Pharaoh’s pursuit, crossing the Reed Sea on dry ground (ch. 14). God provides manna and quail for the people to eat (ch. 16) and water for them to drink (ch. 17) on their journey into the wilderness of Sinai.

Three months after leaving Egypt, the Israelites arrive at Mount Sinai. God’s presence descends to the top of the mountain (19:20), and Moses ascends the mountain to receive the law and instructions for building the Tabernacle (ch. 20-31, 34:4-28). However, while Moses is on the mountain, the people ask Aaron to make gods for them (32:1). Aaron fashions a golden calf, and the people sacrifice to the idol, provoking God’s anger to the point that God decides to wipe them out (32:10). Moses persuades God to relent (32:14), and the Israelites proceed to construct the Tabernacle—complete with its altars, laver, and ark—according to the instructions Moses has received so that God may “dwell among them” (25:8).

Historical Concerns

Date of the Exodus

Many scholars disagree about whether the events described in the book of Exodus took place in the 15th or in the 13th century BC. Arguments for a late date of around 1260 include the names of the Egyptian cities mentioned in Exodus 1:11 and burn lines found at Lachish, Debir, and Bethel dating to about 1200. Arguments for an early date of around 1445 include scriptural evidence in 1 Kings 6:1 and Judges 11:26 and archeological evidence provided by the Merneptah Stele and the Amarna letters, all of which seem to indicate that the Israelites arrived in the land long before the time suggested by the late-date theories.

Location of the Reed Sea

The crossing of the sea in Exodus 14 also presents some historical difficulties. The Hebrew text of Exodus 13:18 actually reads “Sea of Reeds,” not “Red Sea.” In light of this fact, there are several possible locations for the sea crossing. One option suggests that the crossing occurred in the region of Lake Timsah and the Bitter Lakes, East of the Nile River and North of the Gulf of Suez, since these freshwater lakes would have had more surrounding plant life (hence “Reed Sea”) than would the salty Red Sea. Another possible location for the crossing is at the Gulf of Suez—the northern tip of the Red Sea—which borders the Sinai peninsula on its western side. Likewise, there are more than six geographically divergent sites that have been identified as possibilities for the location of Mount Sinai.

Key Theological Themes

Divine Self-Disclosure

God’s revelation of his character takes on new meaning in Exodus. The name Yahweh (translated LORD in most English Bibles), revealed to Moses at the burning bush (3:14; 6:3), is related to the Hebrew word “to be” and carries with it the connotation of eternal self-sufficiency. The Israelite’s understanding of God as Yahweh is greatly impacted in Exodus as God remembers his covenant obligations (2:24), reveals his law (ch. 19-31), responds to intercessory prayer (32:11-14), and dwells in the midst of his people in the Tabernacle (ch. 40). In addition, the plagues on the Egyptians reveal God’s mighty power to redeem his people with an outstretched arm, demonstrating to the people of Israel and Egypt that he is Yahweh (6:6f; 7:5; 10:2).

Presence of God

The presence of God among his people is tangibly displayed in Exodus in several ways. God leads the people out of Egypt, appearing as a pillar of cloud by day and a pillar of fire by night (13:21). God’s presence is manifested further at Sinai (ch. 19) and in his revelation of his presence to Moses (ch. 33). In the closing chapters of Exodus, God’s presence comes to reside in the Tabernacle (ch. 40), and in this way God is present with his people in a tangible sense, dwelling in a tent in the midst of his people as they make their pilgrimage through the wilderness of Sinai dwelling in tents themselves.

Redemption

In Exodus, God liberates his enslaved people by breaking the bonds of Egyptian oppression. The idea of redemption implies salvation that comes about by paying a price, and God's redemption of his people from slavery is an important theme throughout the Bible. The redemption of Israel from Egypt was to be remembered as part of the reason for the Sabbath (Dt. 6:15), and Israelites were commanded to redeem the firstborn of their children and animals (Ex. 13:2).

Law

It is at Mount Sinai that Israel receives the Torah—the instructions that define and detail the way God wants his people to live. Often known as the Sinai covenant, this development fills out the promises made to Abraham. Both **casuistic** and **apodictic** laws are found in the Torah. This law code provides stability and order for the Israelite nation, emphasizing the importance of social justice and holy lifestyles consistent with a nation living in the presence of God. Significant parallels exist between the Mosaic law code and other Ancient Near Eastern law codes, such as the **Code of Hammurabi**, **the Ur-Nammu Code**, and **the Hittite law** code.

Questions Raised by Exodus

The book of Exodus contains many paradoxes that become apparent as we see God working with Moses and dwelling in the midst of his people. Consider the following questions as you read Exodus:

- 1) Does the fact that God blessed the midwives imply that the Bible condones lying (1:15-21)?
- 2) Does God harden peoples' hearts (4:21; 7:3, 13; 9:12; 10:1, etc.)?
- 3) Does God approve of slavery and polygamy? What impact does culture have on the shaping of the law (21:2-11)?
- 4) How do we understand *lex talionis* (the law of retaliation) (21:23-25)?
- 5) Can God change his mind? How can God be omniscient and still allow for genuine freewill on the part of humankind? Can prayer impact God's decisions (ch. 32)?

Conclusion

Exodus continues the story of the Israelites who begin to develop a national identity during their time in the wilderness, transitioning from their roles as slaves of Pharaoh to that of being servants of Yahweh. Throughout the narrative and the legal material in Exodus, God's presence with and concern for his people continue to be revealed in increasing depth and fullness.