

**Getting Started with Exodus**  
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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 “and these are the names,” is taken from the first two words of the book in the Hebrew. The title “Exodus” (“the way out”) is taken from the Greek Septuagint, or LXX<sup>1</sup> explicating the content of the book as being about the way out of Egypt. By the beginning of Exodus, the twelve brothers who settled in Egypt to escape from famine in Canaan had 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, the giving of the law to Moses, and the dwelling of God’s presence with his people in the tabernacle, laying the historical, redemptive, and ethical/legal foundation for the nation of Israel.

**The Book of Exodus**

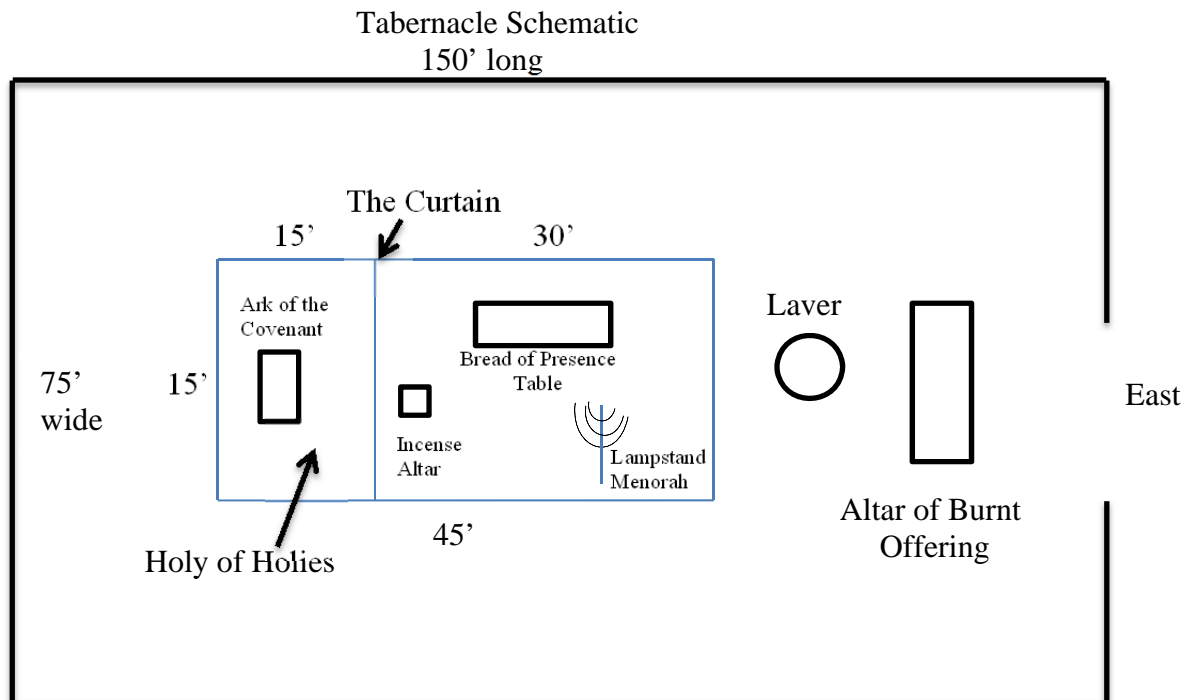
*Content*

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), by having midwives kill all the baby boys at birth (1:16f), and finally, by throwing the baby boys into the Nile (1:22). 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 from Egypt after killing an Egyptian taskmaster who had been beating a Hebrew. He settles in Sinai with the Midianites and lives 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 from the Angel of the Lord to return to Egypt and deliver the Israelites from bondage (ch. 3). The divine being in the bush identifies himself by the title “I am that I am” which gives us the etymology of God’s most sacred name “Yahweh” or “Jehovah” as older English texts rendered it.

Along with his brother Aaron, Moses confronts Pharaoh and demands that Pharaoh release the Israelites. God uses the ten plagues<sup>2</sup> 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 begrudgingly agrees to release the Israelites, who leave Egypt under the leadership of Moses. The Israelites escape Pharaoh’s pursuit, crossing the Reed Sea on dry ground (ch. 14). Pharaoh’s chariots are destroyed by the same sea that provided deliverance for the Israelites. Israel and Miriam sing songs of victory in honor of the divine warrior Yahweh (ch. 15). As they journey through the wilderness of Sinai God provides manna and quail for the people to eat (ch. 16) and water from a rock for them to drink (ch. 17).

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 (chs. 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 received so that God may “dwell among them” (25:8). The glory-cloud of God's presence came down on the newly constructed Tent of Meeting or Tabernacle. The text ends with the consecration of the tabernacle leading up to the need for instructions on how to carry out the various rituals that would be performed in that holy environment. Leviticus provides instructions that would be required for the maintenance of Israel as a theocratic nation in the presence of a holy God.



### Historical Concerns

#### *Date of the Exodus*

Many scholars disagree about whether the events described in the book of Exodus took place in the 15<sup>th</sup> or in the 13<sup>th</sup> century BC. Arguments for a late date of around 1260 BC 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 BC 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 theory.

#### *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 north end of the Gulf of Suez—the north-western extension 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), was revealed to Moses at the burning bush (3:14; 6:3). It is related to the Hebrew word “to be” and carries with it the connotations of eternal self-sufficiency and covenantal loyalty. The Israelite’s understanding of God as Yahweh is greatly impacted in Exodus as God remembers his covenant obligations (2:24), delivers them out of their bondage in Egypt; reveals his law (chs. 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 the Tent of Meeting 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. 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 (Deut 6:15), and Israelites were commanded to redeem the firstborn of their children and animals (Exod 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. Casuistic law is law given in a conditional

form (if x then y). This type of law was common in the ancient Near East and can be found in other law codes such as the Code of Hammurabi. An example of this type of law is Exodus 22:6: “If a fire breaks out and spreads into thorn bushes . . . , then the one who started the fire must make restitution.” Apodictic law is given as categorical imperatives (thou shalt not do x). This form of law is virtually unknown in the ancient Near Eastern context outside of the Torah. The Ten Commandments are expressed in this form (Exod 20:2-17).

This law code provides stability and order for the Israelite nation, emphasizing the importance of a holy lifestyle consistent with a nation living in the presence of God as “a kingdom of priests and a holy nation” (19:6). Significant parallels exist between the Mosaic law code and other Ancient Near Eastern law codes, such as the Code of Hammurabi,<sup>3</sup> the Ur-Nammu Code,<sup>4</sup> and the Hittite law code.<sup>5</sup>

### 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 (Exod 1:15-21)?
- 2) Why did God try to kill Moses or his son on his way back to Egypt (Exod 4)?
- 3) Does God harden peoples’ hearts (Exod 4:21; 7:3, 13; 9:12; 10:1, etc.)?
- 4) How do the plagues of Egypt expose the gods of Egypt?
- 5) Does God approve of slavery and polygamy? What impact does culture have on the shaping of the law (Exod 21:2-11)?
- 6) How do we understand *lex talionis* (the law of retaliation) (Exod 21:23-25)?
- 7) 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 (Exod 32)?
- 8) How are the Sinaitic covenant and the Exodus events referred to in the rest of Scripture?

### 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.

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<sup>1</sup> **LXX:** After Alexander the Great conquered the Mediterranean world in the 4<sup>th</sup> century BC, Greek became the lingua franca of that part of the world. The translation allegedly was completed by a team of 72

scholars who translated the Old Testament from Hebrew to Greek ca. 250-100 BC, and this translation became known as the Septuagint, or the LXX.

<sup>2</sup> **Ten Plagues:** The ten plagues that preceded the Israelites' release from slavery were: the Nile turning to blood (7:14-24), frogs (8:1-12), gnats (8:16-18), flies (8:20-29), plague on livestock (9:1-7), boils (9:8-11), hail (9:13-34), locusts (10:1-13), darkness (10:21-23), and the death of the firstborn (11:1-12:30). Many of the plagues of Egypt seem to have been directed against specific Egyptian gods, including the Nile, the sun, and Pharaoh himself.

<sup>3</sup> **Code of Hammurabi:** The Code of Hammurabi is a Babylonian law-code dating from ca. 1792-1750 BC. This law code includes 282 case laws, some of which are strikingly similar to laws found in the Torah, and some of which point out interesting differences between the values expressed in the two civilizations. Note especially the following examples:

- Article 14: "If a citizen kidnaps and sells a member of another citizen's household into slavery, then the sentence is death" (Ex. 21:16; Dt. 24:7).
- Article 197: "If one citizen breaks a bone of another, then the sentence is the breaking of a bone" (Ex. 21:23-25).
- Article 209: "If one citizen beats the daughter of another and causes her to miscarry, then the fine is six ounces of silver" (Ex. 21:22f).

For more examples, see Victor Matthews and Don C. Benjamin, *Old Testament Parallels*. (New York: Paulist Press, 1991), 62-67.

<sup>4</sup> **Ur-Nammu Code:** The Ur-Nammu dates from ca. 2100 BC and is the oldest law code that has been recovered by archeologists. Many of the laws in the Ur-Nammu code are based on the principle of restitution. Note the following parallels to the Mosaic law code:

- Article 4: "If a son disowns his father and mother with the oath: "You are not my father; you are not my mother," then he forfeits his right to inherit their property; likewise, he can then be sold as an ordinary slave [-not just indentured for three years to pay a debt-] at full market value" (Deut. 21:18-21).
- Article 8: "If the daughter of a citizen, with her parents' knowledge, walks about the city and is raped, then the rapist, if he swears an oath at the temple gate that he did not know she was a free-born woman, shall not be charged" (Gen 34; Ex. 22:16; Deut. 22:23-24).

See Victor Matthews and Don C. Benjamin, *Old Testament Parallels*. (New York: Paulist Press, 1991), 68-69.

<sup>5</sup> **Hittite Law Code:** The Hittite Law Code contains case laws dating from ca. 1450-1200 BC. The code uses language similarly to the ways in which it is used in the Mosaic law code. Note the following parallel:

- Article 193: "If a married man dies, then his brother must marry the widow; if his brother dies, then his father must marry her; if his father dies, then one of his brother's sons must marry the widow. No crime has been committed" (Gen. 38; Dt. 25:5-10; Ruth 4).

See Victor Matthews and Don C. Benjamin, *Old Testament Parallels*. (New York: Paulist Press, 1991), 70-71.