



## An Introduction to the Book of Exodus

### Title

Exodus is the second of the first five books of the OT, which are referred to collectively as either Torah, meaning law or instruction in Hebrew, or Pentateuch, meaning 'five-volumed' in Greek. The English title Exodus is taken from the Septuagint and the Greek noun *exodos*, i.e. 'a going out' or 'departure', the major event of the first half of the book, in which the Lord brings Israel out of Egypt. The Hebrew title 'Names' is taken from the first line of the text, 'These are the names of the sons of Israel who came to Egypt with Jacob' (1:1).

### Author

The authorship and composition of the Book of Exodus cannot be taken in isolation from the rest of the Pentateuch. The shape of the Book of Exodus bears this out as it opens with a list of names referring to characters and events narrated in the book of Genesis (Exodus 1:1-6), and closes with an assembled tabernacle that is filled with the glory of the Lord (40:34-38), without Israel having received full instructions for how they are to serve the Lord in it.

Like most books of the OT, Exodus does not explicitly refer to its authorship or composition as a book. However, its genre and content have traditionally led to the conclusion that it was written by Moses as an authoritative record both of its events and of the covenant instruction that the Lord revealed through him. While the reasons for this assessment of Exodus include the explicit references to Moses either writing (24:4 and 34:28), or being commanded to write (17:14), they are not exhausted by it.

The genre of Exodus is typically understood to be historical narrative since it presents the material as events, speeches, and covenant instructions that took place in Israel's history. As a narrative, the Book of Exodus focuses on specific aspects of the history in order to emphasise certain points for its intended audience, something that all narrative about historical events necessarily does, even if merely through what it selects as important. Exodus emphasises throughout the book that Yahweh, the Lord, has remembered his covenant with Israel, will bring them out of Egypt, and will instruct them on how to live as his people as he dwells in their midst. Integral to this emphasis is the way Exodus also shows that

Yahweh has chosen to reveal his purposes, lead his people out of Egypt, and instruct them on how they are to live, through Moses. Thus, while Moses probably did not write everything in the Pentateuch, e.g. the narrative of his death in Deuteronomy Chapter 34, and while there also appears to be language and references that have been updated for later readers, the Book of Exodus is best read as recorded and composed primarily by Moses.

### Date and Historical Context

The date of Israel's exodus from Egypt is the primary chronological problem for Exodus; the book contains few clues to solve it. While the narrative refers to the cities that the people of Israel were building in Egypt, i.e. Pithom and Rameses (1:11), and the length of their time in Egypt as 430 years (12:40), it does not include the names of any of the kings of Egypt to which it refers, nor does the book of Genesis record the name of the Pharaoh 'who knew Joseph' (Exodus 1:8).

The content of the book clearly indicates that the exodus and its time of year are important for Israel's identity since Israel's calendar was reoriented around the month in which they came out of Egypt (12:2), but Exodus refers to these events as if its hearers and readers were familiar with them, and thus selects and shapes the details of the account in accord with its communicative purpose.

As indicated in the article on the date of the exodus, some scholars, working from the figure of 480 years (1 Kings 6:1) for the time since the exodus to Solomon's fourth year (circa 966 BC), calculate a date of circa 1446 BC for Israel's departure from Egypt. This would fit with archaeological dating of Jericho; refer to the comment made on Joshua 6:5-7. Others, because Exodus 1:11 depicts Israel working on a city called Rameses, argue that this points to the exodus occurring during the reign of Rameses II in Egypt (circa 1279-1213 BC), possibly around the year 1260 BC.

Whatever the date of the exodus, the question is not necessarily about whether the numbers given in the OT are reliable but rather about trying to understand their function according to the conventions by which an author in the ancient Near Eastern context would have used them. Any attempt to determine the date of the exodus necessarily includes the interpretation of both the references in the OT and the relevant records and artefacts from surrounding nations in the ancient Near East. That is, because the OT was first given in an ancient Near Eastern setting, the interpreter's first task is to understand, as much as possible, what an ancient Israelite would have thought the text meant. Scholars are not always sure that they can answer this question when it comes to details about dates and numbers; fortunately, the message of Exodus is plain nevertheless.

The geography of Egypt, Sinai, and the route of the exodus is another important matter for the Book of Exodus that involves a similar process of trying to identify the references in the narrative to the landscape and cities with what is known or has been discovered about their location in relation to the current landscape. For a possible route of the exodus, refer to the map in the section: The Journey to Mount Sinai.

### Theme

The overarching theme of Exodus is the fulfilment of God's promises to the patriarchs that he would make their descendants a great nation. This is carried out despite the opposition of Egypt, the greatest superpower in the ancient world of the time, and despite the unbelief and disobedience of the people themselves. Exodus shows that the success of the exodus must be ascribed first to the power and character of God, who remembers his promises, punishes sin, and forgives the penitent. Second, it highlights both the faithfulness of Moses, who follows divine instructions exactly, and his prayerfulness. It is his prayer, e.g. that leads to victory over Amalek (17:8-16), and his intercession that persuades God to pardon the people after they had begun worshiping the golden calf (Chapters 32-34).

### **Purpose**

Exodus is the second book in the Pentateuch and picks up the narrative of Genesis by focusing on the time when the sons of Jacob (1:1-6) have grown into the people of Israel (1:8). The first half of the book records events that fulfil the promise to Abraham that his descendants would sojourn in a land that was not their own, be afflicted for 400 years, and then come out by the Lord's hand with numerous possessions (Genesis 15:13-14). The narrative of Israel's preservation in and exodus out of Egypt is sometimes referred to as being like a second creation account, both because the vocabulary seems to evoke the first chapters of Genesis (Exodus 1:7), and because it is through Abraham's descendants that the Lord has promised to bless all nations and thus to restore his presence and purposes in the world (Genesis 12:1-3).

The second half of the book narrates the events surrounding the covenant being revealed, confirmed, broken, and renewed (Exodus Chapters 19, 24, 32-34, and 35-40), and records the covenant instructions that the Lord revealed to Israel through Moses at Mount Sinai (Chapters 20-23 and 25-31). The instructions begin with the Ten Commandments (20:1-21) and include a lengthy section detailing the specifics for the construction of the tabernacle and its service (25:1-31:18). But this is not the totality of the Lord's covenant instructions, which are recorded further in both Leviticus and Numbers before Israel finally leaves the region of Mount Sinai for the land of Canaan (Numbers 10:11-34).

Numbers describes how the generation who came out of Egypt ended up wandering in the wilderness instead of entering Canaan. Then the Book of Deuteronomy records Moses' reaffirmation of the covenant instructions recorded in Exodus through Numbers and appeals to the next generation who will enter the land to keep the commandments by fearing the Lord and walking in his ways (Deuteronomy 8:6).

### **Historical Reliability of the Exodus**

Doubts have often been cast on the historical reliability of the exodus account. It is true that no remains of the Israelites have been found in the area of Goshen in the eastern Nile delta or in the wilderness of Sinai. But in neither area would such remains be expected to survive. The mud-built huts of the Israelites have long been destroyed by repeated flooding and, wandering through the wilderness, the people would not have left buildings or other permanent traces. It thus is unreasonable to expect such archaeological evidence. Furthermore, one should not

expect to find extra-biblical texts regarding Israel's stay and departure from Egypt, because the story is negative about Egypt. Egyptian texts are quite propagandistic and would not mention such a defeat.

Nevertheless there is plenty of data that seems to corroborate the biblical account:

1. It is most unlikely that a nation should invent a story of its origins as slaves in a neighbouring country.
2. The 2<sup>nd</sup> Millennium BC was an era when there were many foreigners in Egypt, some of whom were employed making bricks for building projects.
3. The name of the city Rameses is unlikely to have originated or have been remembered later.
4. Some have argued that the sequence of plagues related in Exodus fits with the ecological situation that accompanies and follows the annual flooding of the Nile. This need not imply that the plagues were purely natural.
5. The organisation of the covenant texts in the Pentateuch (e.g. Exodus Chapter 20) fits the pattern of 2<sup>nd</sup> Millennium BC treaties, not later ones.
6. The tent-tabernacle has many parallels in Egypt and Canaan from the 2<sup>nd</sup> Millennium. Indeed traces of a tent shrine dating from about 1150 BC have been found in the wilderness at Timna, not far from the route of the Israelite wanderings.
7. A stele, i.e. an inscribed tombstone-like stone slab, from the Egyptian Pharaoh Merenptah, circa 1209 BC, mentions that he had conquered the people of Israel in an invasion of Canaan. This would fit with an exodus from Egypt some time before this and demonstrates that Israel was already settled as a people in Canaan.

This archaeological evidence makes scepticism about the historicity of the biblical account of the exodus unwarranted. This is not to deny that the story is told to make theological points: much historical writing is motivated by the desire to teach lessons from the past. Nor does the archaeological evidence require one to believe that the Book of Exodus gives a complete and full account of what happened: there are obviously many gaps and events that are passed over. But the evidence does make it unreasonable to challenge the central affirmation of OT faith: **<<I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery>> (20:2).**

### Key Themes

The events and instructions narrated in the Book of Exodus are explicitly framed as the Lord remembering his covenant promises to Abraham (2:24, 3:6, 3:14-17 and 6:2-8). The promises include land, numerous offspring, and blessing for both Abraham's descendants and the nations (Genesis 12:1-3), which are rooted in the covenant relationship with the Lord: **<<I will establish my covenant between me and you, and your offspring after you throughout their generations, for an everlasting covenant, to be God to you and to your offspring after you. And I will give to you, and to your offspring after you, the land where you are now an alien, all the land of Canaan, for a perpetual holding; and I will be their**

**God**>> (Genesis 17:7-8). The covenant promises in Genesis were made with Abraham and reaffirmed with Isaac and Jacob. Exodus highlights the role that Moses fills as the covenant mediator through whom the Lord reveals his purposes to his people and sustains the covenant relationship. Each of these aspects will be described briefly in relation to key themes in Exodus.

1. **Offspring**. As was noted above, the Lord promised Abraham that he would have innumerable offspring (Genesis 15:5) who would also be afflicted for 400 years in a foreign land and come out with great possessions (Genesis 15:13). Through Joseph, the Lord brought seventy individuals into the land of Egypt (Exodus 1:1-6), who became numerous (1:7) even amid affliction (1:8-12), and were brought out of Egypt as a large multitude (12:37-38). Exodus also focuses on how the people of Israel are shown to be Abraham's offspring, both in the faithful actions of some of its members, e.g. the midwives feared God not Pharaoh (1:15-22), and particularly by the fact that the Lord repeatedly refers to them as 'my people' in his words to Israel (3:7) and before Pharaoh (5:1). The Lord is indicating both to Pharaoh and to the people that, although they have been enslaved in Egypt for a long time, it is his covenant promise to them as Abraham's offspring that truly governs their identity.

2. **Land**. The entrance into the land of Canaan is not realised within the events narrated in Exodus, but the promise of the land is held before Israel as a place of provision that is <<**flowing with milk and honey**>> (3:17b), and also as a place they will inherit and where they will live as the Lord's people (6:7-8). The promise of the land is significant for what Israel's response in certain situations reveals about their understanding of both the Lord's presence and his promise to bring them to Canaan. When the people are hungry after coming out of Egypt and wish they were back in slavery by the fleshpots (16:3), the contrast between where they are headed and what they long for in Egypt shows that they have not yet taken to heart what the Lord's deliverance is to signify for them. Their prospects in Canaan are declared to depend on their fidelity in serving the Lord alone (23:23-32), which the Israelites also have not taken fully to heart, as demonstrated by the incident of the golden calf before they ever set foot in Canaan (32:1-6).

3. **Blessing**. The Lord's promise to bless all nations through Abraham looks forward to how Israel's life is to mediate the presence of the Lord to the nations around them, for they are to be <<**a priestly kingdom and a holy nation**>> (19:6b). Israel is to live before God in the world, obeying the covenant instructions that he will reveal to them (Deuteronomy 4:6-8). The events of the plagues and exodus present the opportunity for people back in Egypt and the surrounding nations to join the Lord's people in response to what they have either experienced, thus Israel goes out <<**a mixed crowd**>> (Exodus 12:38), or what they have heard, e.g. Joshua 2:10). The recognition formula, refer to the comment on Exodus 7:5, includes the expectation that the Egyptians will know that Israel's God is the true God (7:5, 14:4, and 14:18).

4. **Covenant mediator**. A key theme of Exodus is that Moses is the one who is called by God to mediate between the Lord and his people. A key indicator of whether Israel will desire to live as the Lord's people is seen in how they respond to Moses as the one who speaks on the Lord's behalf. The story of Moses begins with his preservation at birth (2:1-10), and in Midian (2:11-22), but is highlighted

through the Lord's presence and speech in his call at the burning bush (3:1-4:17), and then in the fact that the Lord speaks only to Moses in Egypt, calls Moses alone up to Mount Sinai (19:20 and 24:2), listens to Moses' intercession on behalf of the people (32:11-14), speaks with Moses 'face to face' (34:29-35), and has Moses oversee the assembling of the tabernacle (40:16-33), and the consecration of both it and the priests who will serve in it (40:9-15).

5. **Covenant presence**. The presence of the Lord is highlighted throughout the Book of Exodus: he appears to Moses in the burning bush (3:1-4:17); he comes down on Mount Sinai in the sight of the people (19:16-20); he reveals himself to the leaders of Israel (24:9-11); he shows Moses his glory and declares his covenant character (34:1-10). Furthermore, a large part of the second half of the book focuses on the instructions for the design of the tabernacle (25:1-31:17), and its assembly (35:1-40:33), in which the Lord promises to dwell among his people (29:43-46 and 40:34-38). Just as the ground on which Moses stood at the burning bush was holy because of the Lord's presence, so it is also his presence among his people that will make them holy. And in light of the covenant breach with the golden calf (32:1-6), Exodus ends with the lingering question of just how a sinful people will live with a holy God in her midst, which is a question that the instruction recorded in Leviticus will begin to address.

### **History of Salvation Summary**

Within the story of man's salvation, the Book of Exodus describes a great forward step. The Book of Genesis showed the plight of the human race and its need for salvation. The call of Abraham began the process of divine rescue. Then Jacob's migration to Egypt seemed to put the plan aside. However, in a most dramatic fashion, Exodus shows the divine plan reactivated. Heaven-sent plagues force the Egyptians to let Israel go. Then, accompanied by the cloud of God's presence, they travel toward the Promised Land of Canaan. Pausing en route at Mount Sinai, they hear God declare to them his laws and seal his covenant with them. Israel is already God's people by virtue of the promises to Abraham; this covenant establishes the people as a theocracy, in which the covenant specifies the operations of the civil and social, as well as religious, aspects of Israel's life. Despite their prompt disregard of their covenantal relationship in the worship of the golden calf, the covenant is renewed and the tabernacle is built, a pledge of God's continuing presence with them. The book ends with the glory of God filling the tabernacle, ready to lead the people to the Promised Land.

The NT sees the OT exodus story as the pattern for the ministry and death of Christ. In him God <<***lived*** (literally 'tabernacled') ***among us, and we have seen his glory***>> (John 1:14b). Jesus sojourned in Egypt, and then came out, fulfilling the pattern of Israel (Matthew 2:15 using Hosea 11:1). At the Last Supper, the Passover meal in accordance with Exodus Chapters 12-13, Jesus referred to <<***the new covenant in my blood***>> (Luke 22:20b), echoing Moses' words in Exodus 24:8. He also described his death as the exodus or departure, Greek *exodos*, that he would accomplish at Jerusalem (Luke 9:31). As Jesus re-enacted the exodus in his own life and death, so must his followers. Baptism into his death identifies the believer with the Israelites' passage through the Red Sea, and partaking of his spiritual food and drink identifies the believer with their experiences in the

wilderness (1 Corinthians 10:1-3). Finally, in heaven, believers shall sing the Song of Moses and the Lamb (Revelation 15:3).

### **Literary Features**

Exodus is an adventure story par excellence. It features a cruel villain in Pharaoh, an unlikely hero in Moses, overwhelming disasters, i.e. the plagues, a spectacular deliverance by crossing through the Red Sea, a long journey through the wilderness, a mountaintop experience, where Moses received the Ten Commandments, and a grand finale, the presence of God coming down to the Ark of the Covenant, filling the tabernacle with his glory. The story features unexpected setbacks and unpredictable delays, magic tricks from Pharaoh's sorcerers and miracles, feasts and festivals, music and dancing, and many close encounters with the living God. God's purpose in all of this was to show his glory by fulfilling the promises he made to his people in the covenant. The exodus is the archetypal deliverance of the OT – the definitive salvation event that established the identity of Israel as the people of God and demonstrated the character of their deliverer as the God who saves.

The basic framework of the book is epic. Epics begin with a nation in crisis, and this epic opens with the Israelites languishing in slavery and their would-be deliverer born under the threat of death by drowning. The story proceeds along epic lines with a cosmic confrontation between good and evil that is happily resolved through a mighty act of rescue and a long journey to freedom. Moses is the heroic, albeit imperfect, national leader who serves as the human instrument of a divine deliverance. Like many epics, Exodus is also the story of the founding of a nation. This helps to explain how the second half of the book connects to the first: once the people of God are delivered from bondage, they meet to receive a national constitution, i.e. the Ten Commandments, and to establish a place for their national assembly, that is, the tabernacle. Within its epic framework, Exodus also contains a wealth of subgenres: rescue story, calling story, human-divine encounter, diplomatic negotiation, plague story, genealogy, institution of a festival, song of victory, travelogue, miracle story, legal code, case law, covenant renewal ceremony, architectural blueprint, garment design and building narrative.

### **The Journey to Mount Sinai (1446 or 1260 BC)**

Among the many theories regarding the route of the exodus, the traditional route to Jebel Musa is considered by many scholars to be the most plausible. Beginning at Rameses, the Israelites journeyed to Succoth, but these two sites are the only ones on the route identified with certainty. From there they travelled to Etham and Pi-hahiroth, where they crossed the Red Sea. From there they travelled to Marah, Elim, Rephidim, and finally Mount Sinai.

Refer to the regional map on the next page.



## Outline

- I. The Exodus of Israel from Egypt (1:1-18:27)
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    - i. The Sons of Jacob Become the People of Israel (1:1-7)
    - ii. New Pharaoh, New Situation (1:8-2:25)
      1. The Israelites Are Oppressed (1:8-22)
      2. The Birth and Youth of Moses (2:1-10)
      3. Moses Flees to Midian (2:11-25)
  - b. Moses in Midian (3:1-4:31)
    - i. The Burning Bush: The Call of Moses (3:1-4:17)
      1. Moses at the Burning Bush (3:1-12)
      2. The Divine Name Revealed (3:13-25)
      3. Moses' Miraculous Power (4:1-17)
    - ii. Moses Returns to Egypt (4:18-31)

- c. Moses and Aaron: The Initial Request (5:1-7:7)
  - i. Bricks without Straw (5:1-23)
  - ii. Israel's Deliverance Assured (6:1-6:13)
  - iii. The Genealogy of Moses and Aaron (6:14-27)
  - iv. Moses and Aaron Obey God's Commands (6:28-7:1-7)
- d. The Plagues and the Exodus (7:8-15:21)
  - i. Aaron's Miraculous Rod (7:8-13)
  - ii. The First Plague: Water Turned to Blood (7:14-25)
  - iii. The Second Plague: Frogs (8:1-15)
  - iv. The Third Plague: Gnats (8:16-19)
  - v. The Fourth Plague: Flies (8:20-32)
  - vi. The Fifth Plague: Livestock Diseased (9:1-7)
  - vii. The Sixth Plague: Boils (9:8-12)
  - viii. The Seventh Plague: Thunder and Hail (9:13-35)
  - ix. The Eighth Plague: Locusts (10:1-20)
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  - xi. Tenth plague: Final sign (11:1-15:21)
    - 1. Warning of the Final Plague (11:1-10)
    - 2. The First Passover Instituted (12:1-28)
    - 3. The Tenth Plague: Death of the Firstborn (12:29-32)
    - 4. The Exodus: From Rameses to Succoth (12:33-42)
    - 5. Directions for the Passover (12:43-13:2)
    - 6. The Festival of Unleavened Bread (13:3-10)
    - 7. The Consecration of the Firstborn (13:11-16)
    - 8. The Pillars of Cloud and Fire (13:17-22)
    - 9. Crossing the Red Sea (14:1-25)
    - 10. The Pursuers Drowned (14:26-31)
    - 11. The Song of Moses (15:1-19)
    - 12. The Song of Miriam (15:20-21)
- e. The Journey (15:22-18:27)
  - i. Bitter Water Made Sweet (15:22-27)
  - ii. Bread from Heaven (16:1-36)
  - iii. Water from the Rock (17:1-7)
  - iv. Amalek Attacks Israel and Is Defeated (17:8-16)
  - v. Jethro's Advice (18:1-27)

- II. The Covenant at Sinai (19:1-40:38)
  - a. Setting: Sinai (19:1-25)
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    - ii. The People Consecrated (19:9b-25)
  - b. Covenant Words and Rules (20:1-23:33)
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    - ii. The Law concerning the Altar (20:22-26)
    - iii. The Law concerning Slaves (21:1-11)
    - iv. The Law concerning Violence (21:12-27)
    - v. Laws concerning Property (21:28-36)
    - vi. Laws of Restitution (22:1-15)
    - vii. Social and Religious Laws (22:16-31)
    - viii. Justice for All (23:1-9)
    - ix. Sabbatical Year and Sabbath (23:10-13)
    - x. The Annual Festivals (23:14-19)
    - xi. The Conquest of Canaan Promised (23:20-33)
  - c. The Covenant Confirmed (24:1-18)
    - i. The Blood of the Covenant (24:1-8)
    - ii. On the Mountain with God (24:9-18)
  - d. Instructions for the Tabernacle (25:1-31:17)
    - i. Offerings for the Tabernacle (25:1-9)
    - ii. The Ark of the Covenant (25:10-22)
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    - v. Tent of the Tabernacle (26:1-37)
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      - 3. The Curtain (26:31-37)
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- xii. The Altar of Incense (30:1-10)
- xiii. The Half-Shekel for the Sanctuary (30:11-16)
- xiv. The Bronze Basin (30:17-21)
- xv. The Anointing-Oil and Incense (30:22-38)
- xvi. Bezalel and Oholiab (31:1-11)
- xvii. The Sabbath Law (31:12-17)
- e. The Two Tablets of the Covenant (31:18)
- f. Covenant Breach, Intercession, and Renewal (32:1-34:35)
  - i. The Golden Calf (32:1-35)
  - ii. Moses Intercedes for the People (33:1-23)
    - 1. The Command to Leave Sinai (33:1-6)
    - 2. The Tent outside the Camp (33:7-11)
    - 3. Moses' Intercession (33:12-23)
  - iii. Covenant Renewal: New Tablets (34:1-35)
    - 1. Moses Makes New Tablets (34:1-9)
    - 2. The Covenant Renewed (34:10-28)
    - 3. The Shining Face of Moses (34:29-35)
- g. The Tabernacle: Preparation for the Presence (35:1-40:38)
  - i. Moses Prepares the People (35:1-36:7)
    - 1. Sabbath Regulations (35:1-3)
    - 2. Preparations for Making the Tabernacle (35:4-19)
    - 3. Offerings for the Tabernacle (35:20-29)
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  - ii. Tabernacle Construction (36:8-39:43)
    - 1. Construction of the Tabernacle (36:8-38)
    - 2. Making the Ark of the Covenant (37:1-9)
    - 3. Making the Table for the Bread of the Presence (37:10-16)
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    - 8. Making the Court of the Tabernacle (38:9-20)
    - 9. Materials of the Tabernacle (38:21-31)
    - 10. Making the Vestments for the Priesthood (39:1-31)
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  - iv. The Cloud and the Glory (40:34-38)