

A LOOK AT A BOOK: Exodus

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Name and Contents

“Exodus” in English Bibles is derived ultimately from the Greek word for “departure” (Exodus 19:1), the name given the book in the LXX. It is an excellent name for the book, for one of its most important sections is the account of the “departure from Egypt” (1:1-15:21). In the Hebrew Bible the book is known from its first two words, “these are the names,” following ancient custom for naming a text.

The book centers in two most important events, the Israelite deliverance from slavery in Egypt through God’s mighty act of salvation at the Sea of Reeds (1:1-18:26), and the establishment of his lordship through the covenant at Mt. Sinai (19:1-40:38). Exodus forms the high point of Old Testament redemptive history, as the means through which God constituted Israel as his vehicle for the redemption of all mankind.

The Importance of the Exodus Story

What the Fourth of July is to the citizens of the United States, Bastille Day is to the French, and the Magna Carta is to the English, the Exodus was to the Israelites. The Israelite writers have mentioned the Exodus more than any other event in their history. In the book of Psalms, for instance, the Exodus theme is sounded again and again. A good example is Psalm 105. After recounting the plagues, the psalmist says:

Then he brought Israel out with silver and gold,
and there was no one among their tribes who stumbled.
Egypt was glad when they departed,
for the dread of them had fallen upon it.
He spread a cloud for a covering,
and fire to give light by night.
They asked, and he brought quails,
and gave them food from heaven in abundance.
He opened the rock, and the water gushed out;
it flowed through the desert like a river.
For he remembered his holy promise,
and Abraham, his servant (Psalm 105:37-42)

The Nature of the Exodus

Changed Times and Changed Circumstances (Exodus 1). Joseph could not live forever, nor could one expect the Hyksos rulers to dominate Egypt forever. Joseph died and the Hyksos were overthrown. As native Egyptians regained the government, the circumstances of the Hebrews changed. The original seventy people who came with Jacob enthusiastically followed the command to “multiply and replenish the earth.” This alarmed the rulers of Egypt, who, in typical political exaggeration, said that the people of Israel were “too many and too mighty for us” (1:9). This was their justification for enslaving the Hebrews for building projects at the cities of Pithom and Raamses (1:11).

Moses Birth and Early Manhood (Exodus 2). If the Exodus was Israel’s Declaration of Independence, then Moses was Israel’s George Washington, Thomas Jefferson, and Continental Congress all rolled into one. True to an honest portrayal of its characters, the Bible lays out Moses’ strengths and weaknesses with equal frankness. The story of Moses is the story of a people; without him, the people would not have been.

In the story of Moses’ birth and childhood, brave women also play vital roles. His mother saves him by putting him in a small boat made of reeds. After the daughter of the pharaoh discovers the baby, his sister maneuvers her back to his mother to serve as his nursemaid.

For Israel, this was a lesson on the providence of God. Growing up in the pharaoh’s household, yet with his own mother as his nursemaid, Moses had feelings for the problems of his people. Those feelings came out in a violent manner one day when he saw an Egyptian beating a Hebrew. Thinking no one was looking, he killed the Egyptian and buried his body in the sand (2:11-12). But his secret got out. Trying to break up a fight between two Hebrews, he was taunted by one of the men about killing the Egyptian (2:13-15). Realizing he was in difficulty, Moses fled across the Sinai Peninsula to Midian. There, in a manner strangely like Jacob’s encounter with Rachel, Moses met Zipporah, the daughter of a Midianite priest. Moses married into the Midianite clan and began the life of a family man (2:15b-22). Meanwhile, back in Egypt, things were going from bad to worse (2:23-25).

The Call of Moses (Exodus 3:1-4:17). Moses was not destined to be a shepherd all his life. His solitary job through the years had given him a knowledge of the desert that was to be invaluable in the work of leading the people from Egypt.

While pasturing his flocks, Moses suddenly became aware of a bush that was aflame, seemingly without burning up. As he went near for a closer look, he became aware of a “presence.” Out of this experience came Moses’ call to lead the people out of Egypt. This call experience is significant because it was said to be the time when God revealed his personal name to Moses. Of the two major terms used by Israel to speak of God, *Elohim* was what one might call the general, or, to use a common analogy, the “family” name for God. It was not only used to refer to the one God but also might be used to refer to any god, or gods (3:1-5).

The name YHWH (translated “I AM WHO I AM” or “Lord”), which was revealed first to Moses on the mountain, was the personal name of God. For example, there might be a large family of Fafoofniks, but only one Fafoofnik with the personal name Abercrombie. Thus there were many *elohims* but only one YHWH.

The proper pronunciation and meaning of the name YHWH is subject to much debate. In Jewish religious services today, the tetragrammaton, YHWH, is not pronounced since to pronounce it wrongly would defile the holiness of God. A substitute word *Adonai* (translated “Lord”) is used.

Moses’ Excuses

When God called Moses, Moses was told that this was the God of the patriarchs (3:6). While Moses was awestruck, he was not so awed that he could not argue, especially when the Lord said, “I will send you to Pharaoh that you may bring my people, the Israelites, out of Egypt.” Moses immediately began to make excuses: (1) The excuse: “Who am I that I should go?” (3:11; the answer: “You will have the Lord’s presence with you, and he will bring the people to this mountain” (3:12). (2) The excuse: “Who are you that you are sending me?” (3:13; the answer: “You shall say, ‘YHWH [the Lord], the God of Abraham, of Isaac, and of Jacob has sent me” (3:14-22). (3) The excuse: “But they will not believe me (4:1); the answer: “I will give you signs – a rod changed to a snake, a leprous hand healed” (4:2-9). (4) The final excuse: “Lord, I cannot talk!” (4:10); the answer: “I will give you your eloquent brother Aaron to be your spokesman” (4:14-17).

On the Road to Egypt (Exodus 4:18-31). His excuses in tatters by the divine answers, Moses set out for Egypt, with the blessing of Jethro. Aaron, hearing that Moses was returning to Egypt, met him on the way. Moses briefed him on what

they were to do. As soon as the brothers got to Egypt, Aaron, in turn, told the Hebrews what was to happen.

Moses: The Struggle with Pharaoh

The Struggle Begins: Moses and Aaron before the Pharaoh (Exodus 5:1-61). As an excuse to get the people out of Egypt, they asked the pharaoh to let the people take a three day journey into the wilderness to worship. The pharaoh's reaction was outright rejection of the request and an increase in the workload on the Hebrews (5:1-9)

The Going Gets Rough: The Plagues (Exodus 7:8-11:10). The stage was set for the struggle to free the Hebrews. It was not just a struggle between human powers; rather it was a struggle between the Lord and the gods of Egypt, in the person of their earthly representative, the divine pharaoh. Since the gods of Egypt were associated with the Nile, Moses chose to challenge them on their home court, so to speak.

After an opening round in which the Egyptian magicians duplicated the actions of Moses and Aaron (the use of serpent magic, the reddening of the Nile, and the plague of the frogs), the Egyptian magicians surrendered, saying, "This is the finger of God" (8:19). From that appoint on, the plagues increased in intensity until the climax was reached with the death of the first-born and the escape from Egypt.

The Plagues: God at Work through Nature. [Moths in Amarillo] At least the first six plagues can be associated with the annual flooding of the Nile River during the period from August to March. The first plague, the reddening of the Nile, has been interpreted two ways: (1) a literal view that the waters actually changed to blood, or (2), a view that the condition may have arisen from one of two natural causes – from red soil washed down from the Ethiopian highlands, or from a blood-red algae, similar to the once which causes the so-called red tide in the coastal waters of Florida.

Frogs, the second plague (7:25-8:15), were common when the Nile flooded, leaving stagnant pools where their long strings of eggs could hatch in to tadpoles and then change into your frogs.

The third plague, called gnats by the New Revised Standard Version (8:16-19), more likely were mosquitoes, bred in the stagnant pools of water. This was too much for the Egyptian magicians, who acknowledged that Israel's God was more

powerful than theirs (8:19). The fourth plague, flies (8:20-24), bred in the filth of the primitive living conditions of ancient villages, were naturally attracted to the piles of dead and decaying frogs.

When this plague hit Egypt, the pharaoh relented a bit. Calling Moses in, he told Moses he would release the people from working long enough to have their worship services, but only on the condition that they remain in Egypt. Moses refused to compromise. Pharaoh then agreed that the people could leave the country to sacrifice if Moses would pray for an end to the plagues. Moses agreed to pray; but when the flies disappeared, the pharaoh changed his mind.

The fifth plague, a disease of livestock (9:1-12), came in January when livestock was turned out to graze in the fields after the waters receded. The disease that killed the frogs probably was anthrax, which is also fatal to livestock.

The flies of the fourth plague probably contributed to the sixth plague, which consisted of painful boils on both men and animals. The flies were not the common housefly so familiar to Americans but a tropical fly that bit the legs of men and of animals. It would have served as a carrier for the virus that caused the boils.

Moses warned the pharaoh that since he had not released the Hebrews, a devastating hailstorm would come. The seventh plague came in a violent thunderstorm accompanied by both hail and lightning (9:13-26). Since hailstorms are limited in scope, Goshoen was once again spared.

The ruined crops brought the prospect of famine and softened the pharaoh's resolution not to let the Hebrews leave. It hardened again rather quickly when the storm ended (9:27-35).

Pharaoh's Compromise Offer and the Eighth and Ninth Plagues (Exodus 10:1-11:10). Pharaoh's advisers urged him to give in to the demands of Moses and Aaron, but the proud ruler did not want to admit complete defeat. Calling the Hebrew leaders in, he offered a series of compromises. He asked Moses who was to go. Moses replied that all their families and flocks had to go. The pharaoh offered his first compromise: "God, but take only the men."

The Lord's reply through Moses was a plague of locusts. These insects, a variety of grasshopper, have been a plague of Africa and the Eastern countries throughout recorded history.

The ninth plague (10:21-29), “darkness that can be felt” (10:21), was in some ways the most disturbing of all. The probable cause was the blinding sandstorms that come with the March winds from the Sahara Desert. Pharaoh summoned Moses and Aaron to deal with them again. This time he offered to let them take their families, but they had to leave their herds. Moses quickly rejected any compromise: “Not a hoof shall be left behind,” he declared (10:24-26).

The Final Plague: The Death of the Firstborn (Exodus 11:1-10; 12:29-32).

While timing was the significant factor in the first nine plagues, causing them to be “wonders” in the eyes of the Hebrews, both the timing and the selective nature of the tenth plague made it the climactic event for Israel. The firstborn son was the most important child, especially from a practical standpoint.

A Way to Interpret the Plagues. A way to interpret the plagues is to view them as a reversal of creation intended to make Israel aware of God’s power. He who had brought order out of chaos in creation had now turned the orderly life of Egypt back to chaos. The climactic act was the drowning of the Egyptian army in the waters of chaos at the sea.

The Exodus

Preparation for the Passover (Exodus 12:1-28). The Passover, which was later combined with the Feast of Unleavened Bread, became the festival for celebrating the Exodus. In the celebration of Passover-Unleavened Bread, the worshiper relived the events of the Exodus. The aim was to make the Exodus the experience of each new generation, and the ritual even today is designed to help the worshiper to identify with the Exodus generation.

Forward! March! (Exodus 12:29-42). The last blow was struck! Pharaoh had had enough! Summoning Moses and Aaron, he told them to take their families and animals and leave. Their Egyptian neighbors also were anxious for the Israelites to leave, even giving them jewelry and clothing. From Raamses they set out to Succoth, a company of Israelites accompanied by a “mixed crowd” (12:38), who presumably were non-Israelite.

Deliverance at the Sea of Reeds. True to his character, Pharaoh had a change of heart and mustered his chariotry and troops in pursuit of the escaping Israelites. Trapped between the onrushing Egyptians and the sea, the Israelites then experienced the dramatic deliverance that was to become throughout the rest of the Old Testament the supreme example of God’ saving acts. At a signal from Moses, God sent a strong easterly wind all night that drove back the waters (14:21), and

the Israelites, unencumbered by chariotry or plentiful supplies, crossed to the other side. The pursuing Egyptians, however, their chariot wheels mired in the soft ground, were engulfed by the waters of the returning flood.

Sing Praises to the Lord (Exodus 15:1-21). The importance of the Exodus to the Israelites is shown by the many songs that commemorate the event. One such song is found in Exodus 15:1-18. This was a later song, probably used in festivals celebrating the Exodus. It was based, however, on the song of Miriam, Moses' sister (Exodus 15:21):

I will sing to the Lord, for he has triumphed gloriously:
Horse and rider, he has thrown into the sea.

A Father-in-law's Advice (Exodus 18:1-27). The people came at last to Sinai. Soon afterward, Moses' family – accompanied by his father-in-law Jethro – joined him there. It did not take the older man long to see that Moses was overworking himself, trying to do everything for the people. Calling Moses aside, he advised him to set up a system whereby the people would be divided into groups of ten, fifty, one hundred, and one thousand.

Sinai and the Giving of the Law

Israel's Constitutional Convention (Exodus 19-24). Moses finally reached one of his major goals: he brought the people to Sinai. It was there that the constitution of the Israelite people was made and ratified. Through Moses the people were told, "If you will obey my voice and keep my covenant, you shall be a treasured possession out of all peoples." If they met the conditions, they were to be a "priestly kingdom and a holy nation" (19:4-5). To be a holy people meant to be a people set apart for special service for the Lord, since holiness carries with it the idea of separation.

When he came down from the mountain, Moses called the leaders of the people and told them the conditions of the covenant. They agreed to do as the Lord commanded (19:7-8). On the great day came thunder and lightning from the cloud-shrouded mountain, accompanied by the loud blast of the *shophar*, a trumpet made of ram's horn. Descriptions of the appearance of God (Theophany) in the setting of the thunderstorm are common in the Old Testament (Judges 5:4-5; Psalm 18:8-15; 29:3-9). The summons came for Moses to go up the mountain. At the Lord's command he then descended and brought Aaron back up the mountain with him (19:16-25).

The Ten Words (Exodus 20:10-17; see also Deuteronomy 5:16-21). As they now stand, the Ten Commandments (known as the Ten Words in Judaism) are expanded from the earliest form, which is believed to have consisted of ten concise statements:

1. You shall have no other gods (*elohim*) before me.
2. You shall not make for yourself a graven image.
3. You shall not take the name of the Lord your God in vain.
4. Remember the Sabbath day and keep it holy.
5. Honor your father and your mother.
6. You shall not murder.
7. You shall not commit adultery.
8. You shall not steal.
9. You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor.
10. You shall not covet.

The Tabernacle. Two long passages in Exodus describe the tabernacle. In chapters 25-31, God reveals to Moses the plan, materials, and contents. Chapters 35-40, in which Moses carries out God's commands, repeat this account almost verbatim.

The tabernacle was a portable shrine. Inside the Holy of Holies was only the ark, a wooden chest containing the tablets on which were inscribed the Ten Commandments.

In Exodus 25:8 God says: "Let them make me a sanctuary, that I may dwell in their midst." The tabernacle, then, was the localization of God's presence with his people, a visible symbol that he was their God. Here Israel was to worship and atone for breaches of the covenant stipulations.

The Covenant Broken (Exodus 32). The people's commitment to the covenant did not erase their proneness to rebellion. When Moses delayed coming down from the mountain, they assumed the worst had happened and demanded he make images for them to serve as gods. Aaron did as they requested, trying still to point them to the Lord (32:1-6). Moses' magnificent prayer of intercession following the Lord's threat to destroy the rebels revealed the depth of the man's commitment to his people (32:7-14). That love for the people did not keep him from a wrathful explosion when he came down from the mountain and found the people dancing around a golden calf. In a fit of temper, he threw down the tablets on which the

Commandments were written, literally breaking the Ten Commandments! The calf was destroyed.

Outline of the Book of Exodus

Deliverance from Egypt and journey to Sinai (1:1-18:27)

 Oppression of Hebrews in Egypt (1:1-22)

 Birth and early life of Moses: his call and mission to Pharaoh (2:1-6:27)

 Plagues and Passover (6:28-13:16)

 Exodus from Egypt and deliverance at Sea of Reeds (13:17-15:21)

 Journey to Sinai (15:22-18:27)

Covenant at Sinai (19:1-24:18)

 Theophany on Sinai (19:1-25)

 Granting of covenant (20:1-21)

 Book of the Covenant (20:22-23:33)

 Ratification of covenant (24:1-18)

Instructions for tabernacle and cultus (25:1-31:18)

 Tabernacle and furnishings (25:1-27:21; 29:36-30:38)

 Priests and consecration (28:1-29:35)

 Craftsmen of tabernacle (31:1-11)

 Observance of Sabbath (31:12-18)

Breach and renewal of covenant (32:1-34:35)

 Golden calf (32:1-35)

 God's presence with Moses and people (33:1-23)

 Renewal of covenant (34:1-35)

Building of tabernacle (35:1-40:38)

 Freewill offering (35:1-29)

 Appointment of craftsmen (35:30-36:1)

 Building of tabernacle and furnishings (36:2-39:43)

 Completion and dedication of tabernacle (40:1-38)

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