

The Book of Exodus

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What’s the Book of Exodus?

The Book of Exodus tells the story of the central theological event for the ancient Israelites: their deliverance from slavery in Egypt under the leadership of Moses and their formation as a people at Mount Sinai. This account, more than any other, represented their understanding of God’s concern for them. It also became a central theme in Christianity.

The term *exodus* can be confusing. It comes from a Latin word meaning “going out.” On one level it refers to the second book of the Bible, which describes God’s deliverance of the Israelites from slavery in Egypt. On another level it is used as shorthand for the event itself. In addition, “the exodus” is sometimes used to mean the whole sequence of events that led to the Israelites’ deliverance from slavery. I will use *Exodus*, with a capital “E” to refer to the book of Exodus, and *exodus* with a lowercase “e” to refer to the event.

The Book of Exodus can be divided into two parts. The first part focuses on the exodus. It opens some four hundred years after the death of Joseph. The Israelites are called Hebrews in the book, a term probably referring both to their foreign origin (from the perspective of the Egyptians) as well as to their lower social status. They are slaves, who must endure Pharaoh’s oppression. Chapters 1 and 2 of Exodus describe both this oppression and the birth of the person who will deliver them from it, Moses. As an infant Moses is saved from certain death by a twist of fate. Instead of being killed by the Pharaoh, he is raised by Pharaoh’s own daughter!

The book quickly jumps to Moses’ adult life: how he fled from Egypt but was called by God to free the Hebrew people (see Exodus 2:11—7:7). The central part of the first half of the book (Exodus 7:8—15:21) describes the “negotiations” between Moses and Pharaoh, resulting in a series of plagues. During the last plague, the Hebrew people slip out of the country. The Egyptian army pursues them, but God allows the Hebrews to escape. This is the heart of the exodus event.

The second half of the book of Exodus consists of the “wilderness narratives,” so called because the stories take place outside of Egypt, in the area the Israelites called “the wilderness.” While the people wander in the wilderness, God leads them to a special mountain where he gives them many laws. This group of laws, which includes the Ten Commandments, form the basis of the Mosaic Covenant, the covenant God made with Israel through Moses. The final fifteen chapters of the Book of Exodus deal primarily with the building of the tabernacle, the portable shrine that the Israelites used to worship God during this migratory period.

The Book of Exodus, then, tells the history of Israel from the birth of Moses to the point at which the Israelites build the tabernacle in the wilderness. Imbedded in this historical narrative are many of the laws that formed the basis of Israelite religion.



Historical Background for Exodus

The Book of Exodus, like the Book of Genesis, was written much later than the events it describes and includes material from a variety of sources. To review, the first four books of the Bible rely upon at least three distinct sources, the Yahwist, the Elohist, and the Priestly writer, from at least three different periods of Israel's history. Thus the Book of Exodus has elements probably written during the united monarchy (the date of the Yahwist), the divided monarchy (the Elohist), and the Restoration Period (the Priestly writer).

Unlike most of Genesis, however, the story that is told in Exodus seems to be set in a specific time period. The Book of Exodus tells us that a new pharaoh arose who “did not know Joseph” (Exodus 1:8). This pharaoh and his son built the cities of Pithom and Ramses. These cities were constructed under the reigns of Seti I and Ramses II, who ruled during the New Kingdom period.

This date also matches some historical evidence after the exodus. The pharaoh immediately following Ramses II, Merneptah, mentions Israel in a monument he wrote sometime in the twelfth century BCE, as a people settled in the Levant. This is the earliest mention of Israel outside the Bible. This means that any exodus had to have happened long enough before that date for the people to have settled in the Levant as an identifiable political group. Again a date in the time of Seti I and Ramses II fits this information.

However, outside of this general information, there is no independent historical evidence for the exodus. Egyptian records mention no plagues. The inscriptions of Seti I, Ramses II, and Merneptah make no reference to a slave revolt or to the defeat of an Egyptian army at a “sea.” Some people note that there could be many reasons for this. For instance, kings did not usually mention the battles they lost. In addition, because the story is told for and by the Israelites, the events behind the narrative may have been much more modest in scale, exaggerated by Israelite storytellers over the course of a few hundred years to make certain theological points. This reminds us again that the main goal of the Book of Exodus is not to recount factual accuracy.

Yahweh as Warrior

Because the story of the exodus is and has been so popular, we tend to expect it to be an uplifting story. Yet, whenever I teach this material, I find that there are a significant number of people for whom the biblical account of the exodus is troubling. We will see that the Book of Exodus portrays God as violent and manipulative, especially in the treatment of the Egyptians. This description of God can offend modern sensibilities if readers do not take the time to understand why the Israelites found such a representation of God to be uplifting. We will deal with this issue more fully when we read specific texts, but I would like to introduce the problem here.

In the polytheistic cultures surrounding Israel, such as Babylon and Canaan, some of the most important and powerful deities were warrior gods and goddesses. These were divine beings that fought beside the human army in times of national crisis. Every nation in the ancient world had warrior gods, and ancient peoples did not venture into war without first being sure that their warrior gods were with them. Priests and prophets accompanied the armies to deliver oracles and perform ritual sacrifices. You may be familiar with certain Greek or Roman myths in which the gods fight in Heaven while the human army fights on earth.

The Israelites also believed that when their army went out to battle, Yahweh accompanied them. We will see this over and over again in the Bible. Parts of the Book of Exodus, especially those from the Priestly source, portray God as a warrior defeating the army of Egypt.



Today we may be offended by the thought of God's participating in the killing of human beings, especially if we concentrate on the graphic military images the Bible uses. Yet this idealization of God expresses a common theological hope that people have. Even today when armies go off to battle, we pray for the safety of the troops and sometimes for the success of their mission. Some Christians believe that some wars are "justifiable," while other Christians are pacifists. Even pacifists, however, hope that God will reward the just and that a just peace will prevail.

Israel's language of a warrior God expresses this same human hope. The Hebrews in Exodus looked to God to relieve their oppression as slaves and to bring them to a land where they could live free and secure, a land where they would be able to worship their God. Their stories express this hope.

In addition, it is essential to remember that the Israelites never had a big and powerful army. Neither were they a country like the United States with weapons of mass destruction in their grasp. They were a weak nation during the monarchy. Their weapons tended to be inferior, and they had to buy military equipment from other, more powerful nations, such as Egypt. Because of this weakness, the Israelites had often experienced destruction at the hands of other more powerful nations, nations that were, from their perspective, evil and unjust. The poems and narratives that celebrate God's ability to kill the most powerful army in the world express the impossible hopes of a powerless nation, not the violent fantasies of a military machine. It is not surprising that as citizens of a powerful country, we may have trouble seeing a violent God as a comforting figure, while people in oppressed countries today may more easily see the God of Exodus as a liberating figure who saves people from injustice.

Plagues as Miracles

Some people have tried to explain the nine plagues as a naturally occurring series of disasters. Though such an explanation makes sense to our modern scientific way of thinking, it does little justice to the story itself. The plague narratives explicitly demonstrate to the reader that these were miraculous events, brought about by the power of God. Even if these disasters happened at other times, their occurrence at this particular time, in this particular order is divinely arranged. In addition, the number of plagues, their duration, and the fact that they only affect the Egyptians are all part of the mythic portrayal of this material.

I have found that some students have difficulty with the depiction of God in these stories. Though the plagues begin with Pharaoh "hardening his own heart," they eventually talk about God's hardening Pharaoh's heart. This seems particularly cruel for two reasons. First, in these cases, Pharaoh appears to have agreed to let the people go. God is manipulative and interrupts Pharaoh's exercise of free will. If we remember that this text is making fun of the Egyptian belief that Pharaoh was a god, then Yahweh's manipulation of Pharaoh is really showing Yahweh as the only true god. A second problem still remains, however. God's manipulation of Pharaoh results in suffering for both the Egyptians and the Hebrews. God is then unfair and cruel.

Though I cannot explain away this dimension, a discussion of the use of this material can provide another way to think about the function of the story. We began the article by talking about Exodus as a version of the exodus event, probably retold within the context of a ritual reenactment. We paralleled the exodus to the Passion Narratives, which are re-enacted during Holy Week. Let's return to that parallel for just a moment.

As the story of Jesus' Death is retold on Palm Sunday and Good Friday, the readings portray Judas in a particular way. He is depicted as evil, greedy, the worst kind of traitor. Neither the Bible nor the liturgy tries to understand his interior motivation. Judas's portrayal serves the function of moving the plot along, and he comes to represent those that turn their back on Christ. Certainly the historical Judas did have



reasons for doing what he did that are unexplored in the liturgy. But when I participate in the Holy Week liturgies, I do not worry that we are not giving Judas a fair shake.

Pharaoh represents evil for the Israelites. He is proud, mean, a perfect “bad guy.” He is a great foe for God, because he deems himself to be a god. The stories of the plagues are arranged to create dramatic tension. As the plagues progress, they intensify. By the time the Egyptian army drowns in the sea, the audience feels justified joy at their defeat. The biblical authors do not choose to explore the inner motivations of the Pharaoh. They do not choose to tell the story from his point of view, because the point of the narrative is for the audience to recognize the great power of God.

In some ways the Book of Exodus is like a good action movie. It pits good against evil. It characterizes the villain as foolish, boastful, and deserving of his fate. It builds up the dramatic tension with increasingly spectacular plagues. It ends in the triumph of the “little guy.” Moses is depicted as an unlikely hero, afraid and reluctant. The Hebrews that he saves are weak and oppressed. God is the ultimate hero, however, the one who does all this for a poor and lowly nation. God hears the cries of their oppression, and provides them with a spectacular defeat of their enemy.

A Miracle by All Accounts

Though the general outline is clear enough, the details are unclear, due to the fact that the story of the crossing of the sea has been pieced together from several different sources. Not all source critics agree on which verses belong to which source, but they all agree that what we have here is a composite text.

The Yahwist version of the story depicts the event in more natural terms. A wind that comes in the night dries up a shallow lake bed. The Hebrews cross over safely, but the wheels of the Egyptian chariots get caught in the mud. As the wind subsides in the morning and the sea returns to its normal depth, the army is drowned. The Yahwist depicts this event as a miracle of timing. God sent the wind in answer to the cries of the Hebrews.

Another version of the story, by the Priestly writer (P), adds mythic elements so that the reader does not miss the point. The writer has added military language throughout the material. The size of Pharaoh’s army is recounted, and the unarmed Hebrews march in battle formation and set up a military camp. How is the victory achieved? Yahweh fights. This divine warrior will not be defeated even by Pharaoh and his whole army. The text makes clear that deliverance was not some lucky break for the Hebrews; it was a miracle! In order to stress this theme, P reinforces the miraculous elements. God orders Moses to lift his staff. When Moses does, the water splits, forming walls on each side of the fleeing slaves. As the Egyptian army enters this path, Moses lowers his staff and the waters come crashing down on them. The message in P is that, even if God would have had to firm up the waters like wall, the Israelites would have been saved.

The earliest version of the story is actually found at the end. The poem in chapter 15 derives from a pre-Yahwistic source. Although the text has Moses singing the song, notice in verses 20–21 that his sister, Miriam, leads the women in this song. In Hebrew a song’s “title” was the first line of the song. The verses that credit Miriam with leading the song are probably more original, as women generally sang the victory song.

Yahweh is portrayed as a warrior in the poem, although the details of the victory are imprecise. Did the army sink (see 15:4), or was there a flood (verse 5); did the waters congeal (verse 8), or did the wind stir up a tidal wave (verse 10)? Though these versions may disagree as to the mechanism of the event, they all agree it was a miracle. God saved the Israelites by getting them across that sea.



Summary: God, the Liberator

Though the general outline of these stories from Exodus is probably familiar to many contemporary readers, the details of the text can be surprising and even troubling. Every time I teach this material, I have some students who love it. They find the plot exciting and the power of God that it conveys uplifting. I also have other students who are upset by the way God is portrayed. However, no matter what your reaction is, the bottom line is that these texts were not meant for us. These were uplifting stories written by and for a people whose lives were very different from our own. The Israelites, who wrote and preserved this material, had experienced unjust oppression at the hands of their enemies for generations. They knew that the kind of slaves the Book of Exodus is imagining are those whose lives were deemed not worth the bits of food it cost to feed them. They understood what it was to sit helplessly while an enemy slaughtered their children. Can you blame them for believing that God is powerful enough to remedy this unjust life? Sometimes I think that some of us live so comfortably that we identify too easily with the Egyptians in this story. After all, in the political arena today, the United States is far more like ancient Egypt than it is like the Hebrews.

People who hold these texts to be sacred need to remember a basic principle when reading the Bible. The Bible is Divine Revelation in human words. Humans experience God's presence imperfectly. Humans experience "bits" of God, really. The people who wrote these texts were trying to express their experience of their God. They were conveying something about God's power. They were saying that God can enter human history and shape its events, that God's power exceeds that of any great nation, any boastful leader, any person who would put themselves above God. They were also trying to express their experience of God's care for a people, a care that goes so deep that God would enter human history to remedy an unjust situation.

The text may lead us to think about God's justice. Is everything that God does just, or can God commit an unjust act? Can the experience of oppression be so great that God's power is justly expressed in terms of victory over human enemies? And is God any more just if the oppression is allowed to continue as a result of God's mercy on the oppressors?

In sum, the story of the exodus unfolds as a cosmic battle between the self-proclaimed god, Pharaoh, and the true god, Yahweh. Within this cosmic battle, an unlikely hero emerges, Moses, who saves a poor but righteous people. The story is filled with mythic elements, such as the miraculous survival of the infant Moses, the duration and variety of the plagues, the death of the first-born, and the miraculous crossing of the sea. While these mythocosmic elements reflect the original liturgical setting of much of the material, the details also highlight the foundational nature of this account. It is not just about some slave revolt in the past. It is about God's gracious and powerful redemption of the nation. The mythic details keep the narrative focus on Yahweh. The narrative details prepare the reader to join the song of praise of the triumphant Hebrews that closes this material: "The LORD is a warrior; the LORD is his name!" (Exodus 15:3).

(This article is adapted from *Encountering Ancient Voices: A Guide to Reading the Old Testament*, by Corrine L. Carvalho, PhD [Winona, MN: Saint Mary's Press, 2006], pages 67–87.)

