

The Exodus

Exodus 1 - 18

"Exodus" is a Greek word, which means "a coming out." It is the title given to this book in the Greek translation of the Old Testament, the "Septuagint". The events of the exodus are crucial to the self-understanding of the people of Israel. For Israel, God is the God who set them free from Egypt (see Exodus 20:1; Deuteronomy 6:20-end; Hosea 11:1). The exodus was a new start some 400 years or more after the time of Abraham, Isaac, Jacob and Joseph. To some extent the stories of the patriarchs form only the prelude to the life of Israel as a nation, which began with the exodus. Yet the covenant he had made with the patriarchs was the source of God's resolve to save their descendants from Egypt (2:23-25; 3:7). Their whole life as a people is based on this mighty act of salvation, and much of the rest of the Old Testament sees them wrestling with the question, "What does it mean to be God's chosen people, saved and set free?"

The exodus story, so important in Israel's history, was told in a number of versions before the books we know as Exodus, Leviticus and Numbers were compiled. Just as in Genesis, the compilers have drawn on several different versions from the different sources, which include "J" and "P" as well as separate law-codes such as the Ten Commandments (Exodus 20:1-17). This can be seen clearly in the way the much later regulations for the Passover festival have been inserted in the story itself. Although they have attempted to give both a coherent narrative and a single overall viewpoint, this has not always been possible. There are two traditions about the revelation of the divine name YHWH. The route of Israel's journey from Egypt to Palestine is uncertain and as a result no one is really sure exactly which mountain the Bible refers to as Mount Sinai.

The deliverance of Israel from Egypt leads directly to their meeting with God at Mount Sinai (3:12) where they are brought into covenant with him and receive the Law.

Day 18. Psalm 93: Exodus 1:1 - 4:17

The Call of Moses

Psalm 93

The Lord rules in power over the world and over the forces of chaos symbolised by the sea.

Exodus 1

It is now some four hundred years later than the events recounted in Genesis, a new dynasty has arisen in Egypt and the people of Israel are now being treated as aliens and subjected to slavery and oppression. This description of their condition, although short, is very important as the definitive statement of the situation from which God rescued them.

Special mention is given to the Hebrew midwives, who were prepared to risk their lives to stand up to state oppression.

In contrast to the outward and political bondage of Israel, Christians think of themselves as having been "slaves to sin" (Romans 6:15-18). Jesus came to save his people from their sin (Matthew 1:21) by his death and resurrection.

Exodus 2

Now the narrative introduces Moses, whom God raised up to set his people free. His deliverance from the Nile and privileged upbringing were part of his preparation. So was the failure of his early manhood. Naturally stirred up by the plight of his people he tried to help them in his own way and at the wrong time, and in exile appears to have given up hope of having any more to do with Israel. Later, Moses had to face his failure and lack of confidence, but this very weakness kept him closer and more reliant on God as he carried out the task God had given him. Not only is failure a valuable lesson for the person who wants to serve God but in many ways God is able to use our weaknesses more effectively than our strengths.

2:23-25 are key verses in this passage. They remind us again of the promise God made to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. God acts both because he is moved by the plight of Israel and out of faithfulness to his promise.

Exodus 3

Throughout the Old Testament and for most ancient peoples, a person's name was much more than a designation. It held the key to their character and identity. This

is why the changes of name, from Abram to Abraham and Jacob to Israel are important. It was also believed that knowing a person's name gave a degree of power over that person, which is why God withheld his name from Jacob at Genesis 32:29.

By revealing his name to Moses, God is making an even greater commitment to Israel and giving them privileged access to him in worship. The idea of a special bond between a people and their god was commonplace, but in Israel's case not only does the divine name suggest a God who is sovereign over all others but this God promises both to deliver them from Egypt and to give them a land that supposedly belongs to other gods.

Even so, God's name remains elusive. It can mean "I am", "I am who I am", "I will be what I will be", "I am the One who Is" among a range of alternatives. Whoever God is, the Israelites have not been told the whole secret of his person. But they have been told that he is he is the God who chose their ancestors and was worshipped by them and that he is committed to their welfare.

The words, "the LORD" (capitals for LORD) translate the Hebrew word, "YHWH" wherever they appear. "YHWH" sounds like the Hebrew for "I am". It is normally taken to be the divine name and pronounced "Yahweh" (or sometimes "Jehovah").

Exodus 4:1-17

As a young man, Moses was too eager to come to the aid of Israel in his own way. Now as an old man he is reluctant to do so, even when called by God. But God has the purpose in sight for which he called and saved Moses and will not relent. He has the answer to Moses' objections in the shape of the signs he gives him and his brother Aaron, already on his way to meet him (4:14). Often, God can operate most effectively in an area of weakness which is yielded to him; his weakness is stronger than human strength (1 Corinthians 1:25).

Day 19. Psalm 115; Exodus 4:18 - 6:27

Moses and Aaron in Egypt

Psalm 115

The power of the God of Israel compared with the futility of idols.

Exodus 4:18-end

Moses and Aaron prepare to journey to Egypt to confront the king who is oppressing God's people. God promises them success, but not before they will meet a series of setbacks. The most significant obstacle is, of course, the Pharaoh himself. The hardening of his heart is predicted in 4:21 and seen in 5:2, where the words, "I do not know the Lord," imply refusal to acknowledge his authority.

Pharaoh's refusal was *both* a free decision *and* part of God's overall purpose. As in the story of Joseph, God brings about his purpose through the decisions of human beings, without in any way infringing their freedom. Exactly how God does this is never explained and is probably beyond our comprehension. In this case, God's purpose is to rescue his people; mercy and deliverance for them means judgement on their oppressors.

In many other cases in the Bible, judgement on the oppressor is postponed; the powers and principalities may oppose God's rule but he is sovereign and his purpose will eventually triumph. But in this, the "paradigm case" of salvation for the Old Testament, judgement and salvation are seen together. The hardening of Pharaoh's heart means that Israel's salvation is achieved by God alone, not by reasoned persuasion or by a political programme but by the sovereign intervention of God.

4:24-26 is one of the most obscure passages in the Bible and commentators are uncertain of its meaning, especially as it does not say why the Lord wanted to kill Moses or his son.

Exodus 5

Beginning with high hopes, Moses and the people quickly met disappointment and frustration. This is a frequent experience for those who set out to do God's work. Even for those who have responded to his call, God allows setbacks, hardships and conflict to perfect their character and bring them to more complete dependence on him as well as to ensure that the glory goes to him alone (see 2 Corinthians 1:8-10; 4:7-12). As well as owing nothing to the co-operation of God's enemies, Israel's salvation also owed nothing to the saved themselves (5:19 - 6:1).

Exodus 6:1-27

Most of chapter 6 comes from the priestly source, which the compilers have inserted here. That is why parts of the story are repeated, apparently for no reason. "P" is emphatic that God's name YHWH was not revealed before the time of Moses (6:2-3), the patriarchs knowing God only as "El Shaddai" (6:3; see Genesis 17:1), whereas according to "J" it was known much earlier (Genesis 4:26). In the priestly understanding the revelation of the name of YHWH is linked with his decisive intervention to rescue his people, the formative act of Israel's history. For "J", Israel's God is the one whom all people have worshipped, or at least sought for, since time immemorial. Both have an element of truth and rather than decide between them, the compilers have allowed both to stand.

Day 20. Psalm 94; Exodus 6:28 - 10:20

The Plagues on Egypt

Psalm 94

A prayer for God's judgement on wicked rulers.

Exodus 6:28 - 7:7

As well as recapitulating the story so far, this short passage gives a particularly clear picture of the role of the prophet as God's spokesman. Aaron stands to Moses as the prophets of later times stand to God (see 4:14-16). Aaron is to say everything Moses tells him to, just as later the prophets speak everything God tells them. In the account of the plagues which follows it is assumed that God speaks to Moses and Aaron speaks to Pharaoh on his behalf.

Exodus 7:8 - 10:20

The plagues demonstrate the way God's judgement serves as a warning against sin. In the story of the Flood we have a foretaste of "final judgement", the destruction of the guilty world. But immediately after the Flood, God binds himself to restrain his anger against sin. He allows the world to continue despite acknowledging the evil of human beings and gives commands to limit the effects of that evil (Genesis 9:1-17). In the rest of the Bible the judgement of God is always seen against the background of his patience. Although the sin of humankind merits destruction, God is patient. The first stage of his judgement is always intended as a warning; final judgement only comes when the time is right (see Genesis 15:16, 18:20-21).

Pharaoh had refused to recognise God's right to his people's worship (5:1-2). Through the plagues, God demonstrates his power in order to convince Pharaoh that he is God (7:5, 8:18-19). The plagues gradually increase in severity, with those directly affecting people only arriving after those which affected animals and crops (9:13-16). God also makes a distinction between Israel and the Egyptians to further sharpen the purpose of the judgement (8:22-23, 9:4-7 etc.). At a later stage the Egyptians themselves are given the chance to acknowledge the Lord by taking evasive action (9:17-21). Throughout, the judgement is tempered by mercy, a few of the crops remaining after the hail, and only destroyed by the locusts (9:31-32; 10:5).

God's ultimate purpose is to reveal his glory, both to his enemies and to his own people (9:16; 10:1-2). This he will do not simply by setting his people free but by achieving his purpose despite human opposition.

As the plagues continue, first the magicians (8:19), then some of Pharaoh's officials (9:20-21), then all his officials (10:7), give way, but Pharaoh's heart remains hardened, as it will do until the Passover. Although he plainly sees the demonstration of God's power, he refuses to acknowledge its implications. The same was true of Jesus' opponents; they, too, saw the "finger of God" and refused to acknowledge it (8:19; Luke 11:14-20).

Day 21. Psalm 97; Exodus 10:21 - 13:16

The Passover

Psalm 97

The Lord appears as a righteous judge, preceded by a "theophany" or demonstration of his power which includes clouds and darkness, lightning, fire and heat. God's people rejoice that the time has come for the wicked to be judged.

Exodus 10:21-29

The plague of darkness. Darkness is one of the symbols of "theophany", the approach of the Lord. It suggests that final judgement is near.

Exodus 11:1 - 12:42

The Passover marks the birth of Israel as a nation as God intervenes on their behalf and at the same time brings judgement on the wicked who refuse to acknowledge him. The Lord demonstrates his power by making a distinction between those he chooses for salvation and those who oppose him (Matthew 13:47-50; 25:31-end). In our individualist society, in which everyone is treated as a separate autonomous individual, it is difficult for us to appreciate the mentality of the ancient world, in which everyone was thought of as a member of their family and community, and shared a common fate.

The despoiling of the Egyptians is the background to the building of the tabernacle, or tent of worship, in the desert, when the Israelites offered a large quantity of jewellery and fine material (Exodus 25:1-7).

The Passover is to be remembered at an annual festival. Remembering the acts of the Lord, especially those connected with the origin of the nation was an important element of Israel's worship. It helped to give her an identity as a people, especially when surrounded by nations with different gods, different ways of worship and different moral standards (Exodus 10:1-2, 12:26-27, 13:14-16). The festival is linked with that of Unleavened Bread which continues for a week after the sacrifice of the Passover lambs and commemorates the fact that the Israelites had no time to allow their daily bread to rise on the night they left Egypt.

In the usual sacrifices, later established in the Temple, the blood of the slaughtered animal was either dashed against the altar or smeared on the altar and the rest poured out on the ground (Leviticus 1:5; 3:2; 4:25). The blood was sacred to God (Genesis 9:4-5) and was used in these ways to symbolise cleansing from sin. However, at the Passover, the blood is used in a different way, to ward off

judgement. The lamb is also eaten, symbolising shared fellowship between the people and God. A day of sabbath rest was to be kept at the beginning and the end of the festival. In between, the people could work, but their work would all be in the context of the sacred rest and remembrance of salvation.

Exodus 12:43 - 13:16

A later passage adds some supplementary regulations for the Passover. These include the consecration of the first-born to the Lord in recognition of the fact that all the first-born of the Egyptians were killed but those of Israel spared. The consecration of the first-born is a hint of the time to come, when another first-born Son gave his life for God's people. Especially in John's gospel, the death of Jesus is consistently interpreted as a Passover sacrifice, and it is this link between the crucifixion and Passover that is the origin of Jesus' title, "the Lamb of God."

The Passover, like all the Jewish festivals, had an important teaching function. It was used to help the children grow up with a sense of belonging to the chosen people of God (13:14-16).

The exodus is also a "separation" (see 11:7 etc.). God's people are to be "holy", which means separated to God for a special purpose (see Exodus 19:4-6, and follow these themes in Colossians 1:13-14; 1 Peter 1:14-19; 2:4-5)

Day 22. Psalm 118; Exodus 13:17 - 15:21

Crossing the Red Sea

Psalm 118

A song for a victory procession: Israel praises God for victory in a time of trial. The procession comes through the gates, where those coming in are answered by those inside (118:19-20), and into the Temple, where the welcome from those inside is answered by those coming in (118:26-27). Each of the middle sections of the psalm begins with a reference to trouble or danger and goes on to record the Lord's deliverance (118:5,10,13,17-18,22).

Exodus 13:17 - 14:end

The crossing of the Red Sea is the definitive act by which God delivered his people. Throughout the Old Testament generations looked back to it as the time God proved his choice of Israel and his power to save them (see, for example, Joshua 4:23-24; 24:5-7; Nehemiah 9:9-12; Psalm 66:5-6; 78:11-16; 106:6-12; 114; Isaiah 43:16-19; Daniel 9:15). In places the miracle at the Red Sea is linked with the power of God over the forces of chaos. For examples, see Psalm 77:14-end; Isaiah 51:9-10; and Habakkuk 3:8-15. Zechariah 10:9-12 uses the "exodus" as a powerful metaphor linking God's sovereign power in creation with his power to save his people.

The route of the exodus and especially the water which the Israelites crossed to escape from the Egyptians is a matter of conjecture, but most scholars agree that the Hebrew "Yam Suph" should be translated "Sea of Reeds" and probably refers to one of the shallow lakes through which the Suez Canal now passes.

13:20-end introduces the pillar of cloud and of fire which led Israel throughout the period of desert wanderings and supplied a strong metaphor for God's guidance to generations of Christians (Exodus 33:7-11; 40:34-38; Numbers 9:15-23; 12:5; Deuteronomy 31:15).

The crossing of the Red Sea and the judgement on Pharaoh and his army was engineered by God with a definite purpose in mind: to win glory by executing judgement on Pharaoh (14:1-4; see 9:16). Pharaoh had refused to acknowledge him (5:2) and in response the Lord had hardened his heart (14:8) in order to demonstrate his power to achieve his purpose in the face of the opposition of earthly rulers. It also meant putting the Israelites through a further trial to bring both Moses and the people of Israel into closer dependence in him. Despite the evidence of the plagues and the Passover, Israel were ready to give up. Instead of wishing for God's glory, their only concern was what would be best *for them*

(14:11-12). The writer has no interest in glossing over the Israelites' pathetic attitude in order to present them in a better light. His aim is not to glorify Israel, but to glorify God.

Exodus 15:1-18

The Song of Moses: a psalm which would have been used often in Israel's worship and may have been gradually rewritten to improve it, bring it up to date or insert other topical references.

Day 23. Psalm 105; Exodus 15:22 - 18:end

In the Wilderness

Psalm 105

Israel remembers with thanksgiving the events of the exodus.

Exodus 15:22 - 17:7

Victory at the Red Sea is quickly followed by testing. Still seeking only their own well-being instead of to obey and glorify God, the Israelites begin to grumble and put him to the test. Their faith lasts only as long as things go right; as soon as they meet hardship or difficulty it fails and they expect God to prove himself once again. In the end, despite God's patience with them, the grumblers failed to inherit the promised land, and this was remembered as a warning for generations. (Psalms 78:17-31; 95:8-11; 106:13-15). The same warning is relevant to Christians. We can easily fall into the same attitude, blaming God when life is hard and we encounter trials of various kinds (1 Corinthians 10:1-13).

The quails were God's immediate provision. The manna was to be ongoing. It was not only to satisfy the Israelites' hunger, but also teach them to trust in God for their daily food. They had to learn to depend on God one day at a time and to rest on the Sabbath. Again, these are lessons for Christians to learn as we journey through the "wilderness" of this life towards the "promised land" of heaven. In the Sinai peninsula, there are insects which produce a substance very like the description of manna on tamarisk twigs, which then falls to the ground and remains until the ants take it away. But this only happens in June. The continuation of the manna and the seven-day cycle could only be miraculous.

16:34 is the first mention of the "testimony" or "covenant", which so far has not been explained. In later chapters we learn of the tablets of the Law, which Moses received on Mount Sinai and were placed in the ark and kept before the Lord in the tent of meeting (33:7-11; 34:29-35).

Exodus 17:8 - 18:12

These stories explain Israel's tradition of enmity with the Amalekites and of friendship with the descendants of Jethro and his people, the Kenites (see 1 Samuel 15:1-6). Behind Israel's wars is the principle of divine judgement. When Israel goes to war it is when they are commissioned by God to fight. Here, those who oppose God's people become the Lord's enemies, those who help them, his friends.

17:10-13 gives a picture of prayer and its importance. While some of God's people fight the battle on the ground, Moses and his helpers fight the spiritual battle in prayer.

Exodus 18:13-end

Israel's life was based around law. Her leaders were judges and her ideal was found in right dealing and right relationships summed up in the words "righteousness" and "peace".

Moses' experience is an early example of the importance of shared leadership. The key factors were the people themselves having a basic knowledge of the Law (18:20), the existence of people with the ability to lead (18:21), good organisation (18:22) and God's blessing (18:19,23).
