

The Old Testament: Part Five

The Book of Exodus

The second book of the Bible is called Exodus, from the Greek word for departure. It continues the history of the chosen people from the point where the Book of Genesis leaves off. It recounts the oppression by the Egyptians of the ever-increasing descendants of Jacob and their miraculous deliverance by God through Moses, who leads them across the Red Sea to Mount Sinai where they enter into a special covenant with the Lord.

The Book of Exodus is regarded by all scholars as *the* most important book of the Old Testament because it tells us about the two most important events in Israel's history: how God *frees* the Israelites from slavery in Egypt and how he enters into a solemn *covenant* with them at Mount Sinai. In this book, Israel becomes a nation, and a people special to God.

Religious epic. As a piece of literature, the Book of Exodus is often regarded as a religious epic filled with intense suspense and drama, especially in the chapters that describe Moses' encounters with Pharaoh, the crossing of the Red Sea, and Moses' encounter with God on Mount Sinai. The Exodus story symbolically represents the perennial underdog who defeats an evil foe against incredible odds. The story has inspired all who have fought to overcome all forms of oppression.

A warrior God who saves. While Moses plays a major role in this book, the narrator's primary purpose is to glorify the God who saves Israel from oppression and forms them into a special people.

Structure. Scholars divide the 40 chapters into various groupings. The grouping below is based on the three geographical regions in which Israel encounters God.

- **Land of Egypt.** God works wonders to free his enslaved people from an oppressive ruler (Chapters 1-12).
- **Wilderness.** God guides his people through the Red Sea and provides for them in the desert (Chapters 13-18).
- **Mount Sinai.** God enters into a covenant relationship with Israel (Chapters 19-40).

Date. Most scholars believe that the Exodus event took place around 1250 B.C. in an area northeast of present-day Cairo.

PART ONE – LIBERATION FROM OPPRESSION (CHS 1-12)

Commentary. There is much to comment on in the chapters of this book. You can find a much more complete commentary on our parish website: www.ascensioncatholic.net (on homepage, click on *Commentaries on Books of the Old Testament* and see Articles 7, 8, and 9).

Chapter 1: In the opening chapter, we are told that the descendants of Jacob become so numerous that they are seen as a threat to a new king who knows nothing about Joseph. The new king sets in motion a plan to oppress and enslave the Israelites.

Chapter 2: Birth of Moses and his flight into Midian. Moses—which means “to draw out of”—is, at birth, drawn out of the dangerous waters of the River Nile. Later he will draw his own people through the waters of the Red Sea. Commenting on this stage in Moses' life, *The Catholic Bible, Personal Study Edition* (p.64) states: “*The story of Moses present some striking contrasts and fascinating ironies: he is an Israelite, but his name and upbringing are Egyptian; the pharaoh orders the killing of all male Israelite babies, but by doing so he sets in motion the very circumstances that bring Moses into the royal family; his mother abandons Moses in order to save him, but later is hired to be his wet-nurse; Moses kills an Egyptian to protect one of his own people but soon is forced to flee because he fears betrayal by one of his own; the one who threatens to betray him angrily asks, ‘Who made you ruler and judge over us?’ and 40 years later, that’s exactly what Moses becomes; after fleeing, Moses takes refuge among foreigners and there, rather than with his own people, he encounters the God of Israel.*”

Chapter 3: Call and commissioning of Moses. Now we come to one of the great stories of the Bible: Moses encountering God in a burning bush. *Fire* is one of the many images of God in the Bible. No one can touch or grasp fire without getting burned—yet it gives light and purifies. God identifies himself as the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, his ancestors. He tells Moses that he has heard the cry of his people and has come to rescue them and lead them, and Moses will be his instrument in this great work of liberation. Immediately, Moses objects but God tells him that he will be with him. When Moses asks God what his name is, God replies: “I AM”—which some scholars interpret as “I am (the One) who brings (things) into being.” In John's Gospel, Jesus frequently refers to himself as “I AM,” a way of stating that he is God.

Chapter 4: God hardens the Pharaoh's heart—or does he? This chapter has two difficult verses. In 4:21, God says to Moses: “*I will harden Pharaoh's heart.*” What are we to make of this? In those days, people did not distinguish between primary and secondary causes. They saw God as the cause of all things. Today, we would say God *permitted* Pharaoh to harden his heart. We would not say that God *caused* Pharaoh's heart to be hardened, no more than we would say God caused Hitler's heart to be evil. Later in the book, it will say that Pharaoh allowed his own heart to become obstinate (8:15, 9:34).

Then we read a very strange verse: “*On the journey, at a place where they spent the night, the Lord came upon Moses and sought to put him to death*” (4:24). It beats me and probably you, too, as to why God would want to kill Moses for failing to circumcise his son. We must learn to live with the fact that some verses and events in the Bible are very challenging and not easy to explain. Scholars are not sure what this verse means. The footnote in the *New American Bible* (p.62) suggests that God was angry at Moses for having failed to keep the command about circumcision, given to Abraham by God (Gen 17:10). Moses’ life is spared when his wife circumcises their son.

Chapter 5: Moses gets mad with God. In this chapter, we see how things get worse before they get better for the Israelites. When the Israelite foreman blames Moses for their worsening situation, Moses gives God a piece of his mind: “*Ever since I went to Pharaoh to speak in your name, he has maltreated this people of yours, and you have done nothing to rescue them*” (5:22-23). When it comes to our relationship with God, honesty about how we really feel is very important. When our relationship with God goes flat or gets boring, frequently the reason is that we are upset with God about something. But, unlike Moses, we are not relating our true feelings to God.

Chapters 7:14-11:10: The ten plagues. Commenting on the plagues, Fr. John Power writes: “*The plagues were a series of calamities that made the Israelites’ departure from Egypt possible. Whether these calamities were natural or entirely miraculous, their ultimate cause was God. And to the Israelite mind they demonstrated that God was present and active in their midst. And was not this the very name he gave himself?*”

The plagues are intended not so much to punish Pharaoh for his stubbornness, but rather to demonstrate God’s extraordinary power, unequal to any of the gods of Egypt.

“*When God opposes Pharaoh, it is not because God hates the Egyptians and favors the Israelites, but rather because Pharaoh represents the forces of death. In Exodus, we see that the Israelites were the victims of Pharaoh’s violent and oppressive policies. Egyptians die in the story, not because God wills their destruction but rather because they persist in perpetuating deadly injustice. In essence those who lived by the sword died by the sword.*” (Clinton McCann)

11:1-10. The tenth plague which brings about the death of every firstborn Egyptian child, including Pharaoh’s firstborn, finally compels the king to let the Israelites go. We might add that if Pharaoh had not been so stubborn, he and his people would have been spared such a cruel blow. Even in our times, the subjects of powerful dictators suffer greatly because of the godless actions of their leaders, e.g., Hitler.

Chapters 11-15 can be confusing to read because the narrative is interrupted several times with inserts about

liturgical feasts and regulations. The following outline might help as we move through the next five chapters.

- 11:1-10 (narrative): Warning of the final plague
- 12:1-28 (liturgical): How to celebrate the Passover
- 12:29-42 (narrative): Death of the firstborn
- 12:43-51 (liturgical): Directions for the Passover
- 12:1-16 (liturgical): Regulations for two other feasts
- 13:17-14:31 (narrative): Redemption at the Red Sea
- 15:1-21 (liturgical): Songs of Moses and Miriam

Chapter 12: Israel’s Passover

“*This day shall be a memorial feast for you, which all your generations shall celebrate with pilgrimage to the Lord, as a perpetual institution.*” (v.14)

The Passover ritual described in 12:1-28 has become so important in Israel’s history and memory that they are inserted into the middle of the actual event that it is intended to commemorate and make present.

12:21-28. Moses gathers together the elders of Israel and passes on to them God’s instructions on how this new Passover feast is to be celebrated. He stresses the importance of celebrating this ritual ever year.

Blood on doorposts. In 12:7, the Israelites are ordered to sprinkle some blood of the **Passover Lamb** on the doorposts of their home. This blood which saved the first-born sons of Israel from immediate death, was seen by the early church as a foreshadowing of the blood of Christ, our new Passover Lamb, whose blood saves us from eternal death.

12:31-36. God’s victory over the oppressor is underlined by two facts: (1) Pharaoh not only allows the Israelites to leave but *orders* them to leave, and (2) the Egyptian people are so glad to see the Israelites go that they willingly give them gifts of silver and gold and clothing on their way out.

PART TWO: JOURNEY IN THE WILDERNESS (CHS 12:37-18:27)

Chapters 14-15: Crossing the Red Sea. In these two chapters, we have two accounts of the crossing of the Red Sea: chapter 14 expressed in prose and chapter 15 in poetry. The chapters are filled with religious drama. One would think that the experience of the tenth plague would have convinced Pharaoh that he should not mess with the God of Moses and Aaron. But when Pharaoh realizes that he has lost his best workers, he decides to send his army after them.

A dramatic battle is prepared for us. On the one side, we have Pharaoh’s best soldiers, and on the other side, we have unarmed men, women and children. To the frightened Israelites, Moses says: “*Fear not! Stand your ground, and you will see the victory the Lord will win for you today. The Egyptians whom you see today you will never see again. The Lord himself will fight for you; you have only to keep still*” (14:13-14).

Our childhood images of this event are of Moses waiving his staff and dividing the sea in two. But 14:21 gives us a more natural account of what may have happened. *“The Lord swept the sea with a strong east wind throughout the night and so it turned it into dry land.”* This windswept dry land allowed the Israelites to cross over.

After the Egyptians enter the divided sea, the waters rise up to their normal level, destroying all the pursuers. The miracle is clearly in the *timing* of the events. For the Israelites, there is no doubt that God is behind this amazing event. God, their mighty Warrior, is the one who enabled them to cross over on dry land and the one who destroyed their enemies.

Chapters 15:22-18:27: Israel grumbles in the desert. On the best of days, journeying through a desert is not fun. When thousands of men, women and children spend years wondering in the desert with very little resources and are attacked by desert tribes, the experience becomes almost unbearable. In the desert, the Israelites are called to trust that God will provide for them—a pretty tough challenge even for people who have experienced God’s mighty deeds. So in these chapters, we frequently hear the word ‘grumble.’ In their desperation, they ask: *“Is the Lord with us or not?”* God shows that he *is* with them by providing food and water for them and helping them to overcome the tribes who attack them. The manna or heavenly bread and the water coming from the rocks prefigure the Sacraments of Baptism and Eucharist.

God is inviting the Israelites to a whole new way of life—to trust in him *one day at a time*. This is a lesson in spirituality very familiar to men and women involved in the *Twelve Step Program*. It is in the desert experiences of life that we learn to trust in God one day at a time.

17:8-16—Power of intercessory prayer. Moses, with his hands lifted on high, is seen by many people as a wonderful image of *intercessory prayer*. Aaron and Hur are wonderful examples of two people offering spiritual support to their leader in a time of crisis.

Chapter 18: Moses’ father-in-law gives him wise counsel. In this chapter, Moses has an emotional get-together with his wife, sons and father-in-law, Jethro. As Jethro observes Moses’ leadership style, he is worried. He says: *“You will surely wear yourself out”* (18:17-18). Jethro then advises Moses to look for some God-fearing men to help him (v.2). Moses follows the wise counsel of his father-in-law.

PART THREE: THE SINAI COVENANT (CHS 19-40)

Three months after leaving Egypt, the Israelites arrive at Mount Sinai where they set up camp and where they will spend almost two years. In fact, Mount Sinai is the location for the events described in the rest of Exodus, the entire book of Leviticus, and Numbers chapters 1-10.

19:1-8—God’s amazing proposal and Israel’s response. After the people arrive at Sinai and set up camp, their leader Moses goes up the mountain to meet God who makes an astounding offer to the ragtag, disgruntled bunch of ex-slaves. God says to the people through Moses: *“If you hearken to my voice and keep my covenant, you Israel shall be my special possession, dearer to me than to all other people on earth”* (v.5). God is offering to enter into a very special intimate relationship with Israel. Using marital imagery, which the prophets often did, God is asking for Israel’s hand in marriage.

When Moses comes down from the mountain and tells the elders and the people of God’s marriage proposal or covenant offer, they jump at it: *“Everything the Lord has said, we will do”* (v.8). This may surprise us given the fact that a little while ago, they were asking Moses to take them back to the fleshpots of Egypt. As we will learn, the Israelites, like most of us, are fickle and moody when it comes to their relationship with God.

Like most couples on their wedding day, the Israelites have little or no idea of what they are getting themselves into. As a people, they will be required to be holy as their God is holy (v.6). The requirements of their relationship with God will be spelled out in detail in chapters 20-23.

19:9-15. God orders Moses to prepare themselves for his coming, which occurs in *19:16-19*.

Chapter 20: The Ten Commandments. If you read this chapter, you will see that the Bible’s version of the Ten Commandments is much longer than the Catechism version. The first three commandments have to do with our relationship with God while the other seven touch on our relationship with others. The heart of the Ten Commandments is reverence and love for God, and love and respect for neighbor. The Old Law given to Moses on Mount Sinai is a preparation for the New Law to be given by Jesus in his Sermon on the Mount (Matt 5-7).

Moral theologian Fr. Timothy O’Connell writes that *“the genius of the Ten Commandments...is the tight, clear way they sketch hard-won wisdom of life. We are not forced to spend a lifetime finding this wisdom; it is given to us on a platter. Woven together, the Ten Commandments are a great, inspired poem, drawing lines around a way of living that can make us whole and keep us holy, a way of living that in the end is the only way we can be happy.”*

Sports fields are marked with precise boundaries designating inbound and out-of-bound areas to guide the players. They, however, do not tell athletes how to excel at their sports.

The Ten Commandments serve a similar purpose. They name expectations or, to use a stronger word, the demands of a relationship. They clearly state what is out-of-bounds in our relationship with God and neighbor. But, like other

boundaries in life, they do not necessarily tell us how to excel or be virtuous in these relationships.

20:22-23:30. *The Book of the Covenant* is an amplification of the Ten Commandments which state in a simple, succinct way the basic demands of a healthy relationship with God and neighbor. However, they are silent on what the consequences might be for those who disobey. The Book of the Covenant is a code of practical laws governing the way of life of the people of Israel in the Promised Land. The Book begins and ends with the declaration that Israel shall have no other gods in their lives.

As we read the laws of the Old Testament, we must keep in mind that God reveals himself only in a *partial* way in the Old Testament. The *fullness* of God's revelation only comes with Jesus. In Matthew 5:21-48, Jesus says several times: "*You have heard it said to your ancestors...but I say to you....*" In this section of Matthew's Sermon on the Mount, Jesus brings to fulfillment the *partial* revelation of the Mosaic Law.

Chapter 24: *Ratification of the Sinai Covenant.* Israel's new relationship with God is ratified or sealed with a *blood ritual* and a *sacrificial meal*, foreshadowing the new covenant which Jesus will establish on Holy Thursday when he says: "*This is the blood of the new covenant.*"

Chapters 25-31; 35-40: *Construction of the Ark of the Covenant*

(Note: If you are following the overall narrative of Exodus, you may want to omit chapters 25-31 and 35-40, or go to Numbers 10:10 after reading Exodus 32-34.)

"Then the Lord said to Moses: '*Tell the Israelites...that they shall make a sanctuary for me, that I may dwell in their midst. This Dwelling and all its furnishings you shall make exactly according to the pattern that I will now show to you.*'" (vv 1, 8)

Twelve of the remaining fifteen chapters of Exodus are focused on the construction of a sacred space for the Ten Commandments and some details concerning the worship life of Israel. Inserted in the middle of the twelve chapters are three chapters (32-34) that deal with Israel's apostasy (Golden Calf incident) and the renewal of her Covenant with God.

The newly constructed sacred container for the Decalogue is called by various names: Ark of the Covenant, Meeting Place, Meeting Tent, Dwelling, and Tabernacle. This sacred space becomes the primary symbol of God's presence with Israel and the place of her worship of God. During Israel's journey through the desert, this new worship space is Israel's mobile church. It can be taken down, packed up and moved to the next location. The transition from tabernacle to temple does not take place until the time of King Solomon. The Ark will remain in Solomon's temple until the destruction of the Temple at

the fall of Jerusalem in 586BC when it is probably destroyed. The Bible does not mention it again. The Ark is constructed with great care and adorned with the most precious wood, metals and craftsmanship possible.

It is worth noting that in the construction of the new sanctuary, Moses, on a command from God, conducts what we would call today a *Capital Campaign*. In 25:2, God instructs Moses: "*Tell the Israelites to take up a collection for me. From every man you shall accept the contribution that his heart prompts him to give me.*" God's appeal through Moses is so successful that Moses has to "email" his people to not bring in any more contributions. "*Let neither man nor woman make any more contributions for the sanctuary*" (36:6). Perhaps this was the first and last time a church leader instructed a congregation to stop giving money to a capital campaign!

Members of Moses' congregation are also asked to give of their *time* and *talent* to the construction of the new sanctuary. In 36:10, Moses says: "*Let every expert among you come and make all that the Lord commanded.*" It seems one man, Bezalel, can do anything. God has "*filled him with a divine spirit of skill and understanding and knowledge in every craft*" (31:3-4).

In his first letter, Peter states: "*As each one has received a gift, use it to serve one another as good stewards of God's varied grace*" (1Pt 4:10). Moses could have written that line. He certainly knew how to motivate his people to practice responsible stewardship.

35:26. We have one of the first references to tithing in the Old Testament: "*The first choice fruits of the soil you shall bring to the house of the Lord, your God.*"

Chapters 32-34: *Golden Calf story and renewal of the covenant.* Wondering if Moses will ever return from his forty-day visit with God on the mountain, the people become impatient for something to worship. So they create a *golden calf*—a clear violation of the first commandment.

When God sees what the people have done, he becomes very upset (32:7-10). Moses, the great mediator between God and his people, then makes a powerful plea to God to not destroy his people for their sin of apostasy (vv 11-14). When Moses descends from the mountain and sees what has happened, he smashes the two tablets of stone as a symbolic way of showing that the people have broken their covenant with God.

32:25-29—*Another very violent event.* Moses orders the Levites, the tribe in charge of proper worship, to go and slay thousands of their own people. This seems to be Moses' way of telling his people that breaking the first commandment is a very serious matter. While God is indeed kind and merciful (34:6-7), he does not turn a blind eye to sin. By virtue of their violent action, Moses and the Levites are another example of people who have not yet

received the *fullness* of God's revelation which will only come with Jesus, the Jesus who orders Peter to put his sword back in his scabbard when he is arrested by the soldiers (Matt 26:52).

Chapters 33-34. In 33:7-23, we get to witness close up a very intimate conversation between God and Moses. As you can see, Moses does not want to move on from Sinai without God promising to go with him.

In chapter 34, there is a renewal of the covenant between God and Israel. After spending another forty days on the mountain with the Lord, the people notice how radiant Moses' face has become (34:19). He seems to have received a spiritual facial.

40:34-38—God's presence in the Dwelling. The Book of Exodus ends with words that speak beautifully of God's special presence in the newly constructed Tabernacle Tent: "*Then the cloud covered the meeting tent, and the glory of the Lord filled the Dwelling*" (40:34). This sacred space is so filled with God's presence that not even Moses can enter while the cloud rests on it. This cloud of God's presence becomes the Israelites' guide when they leave Mount Sinai and continue on their journey. "*Whenever the cloud rose from the Dwelling, the Israelites would set out on their journey. But if the cloud did not lift, they would not go forward*" (40:36-37). One of the big challenges in spiritual life is learning to move with God.