



# Exodus

## ORIENTING DATA FOR EXODUS

- **Content:** Israel's deliverance from Egypt, her constitution as a people through covenant law, and instructions for and construction of the tabernacle—the place of God's presence
- **Historical coverage:** from Joseph's death (ca. 1600 B.C.?) to Israel's encampment at Sinai (either 1440 or 1260 B.C.)
- **Emphases:** God's miraculous rescue of Israel from Egypt through Moses; covenant law given at Mount Sinai; the tabernacle as the place of God's presence and Israel's proper worship; God's revelation of himself and his character; Israel's tendency to complain and rebel against God; God's judgment and mercy toward his people when they rebel

## OVERVIEW OF EXODUS

You may find Exodus a bit more difficult than Genesis to read all the way through. The first half (chs. 1–20) is easy enough, since it continues the narrative that began in Genesis 12, but after that you get a series of laws (chs. 21–24), followed by detailed instructions about the materials and furnishings for the tabernacle (chs. 25–31). The narrative then returns for three chapters (chs. 32–34), only to be followed (chs. 35–40) by a repetition of chapters 25–31, as the tabernacle and its furnishings are constructed exactly per instructions. Both the details and repetitious nature of chapters 25–31 and 35–40 can serve to derail you unless you keep them in the context of the big picture, both of Exodus itself and of the larger story found in the Pentateuch as a whole.

The narrative portion begins with Israel's enslavement in Egypt (ch. 1), followed by the birth of Moses, his flight and subsequent call (where Yahweh's name is revealed), and his return to Egypt (chs. 2–4). This is followed by the exodus itself (5:1–15:21), including Israel's forced

labor, Yahweh's conflict with Pharaoh in the holy war by way of the ten plagues, the Red Sea miracle, and a hymn celebrating God the Divine Warrior's victory over Pharaoh. The rest of the narrative (15:22–19:25) gets Israel to Sinai in preparation for the giving of the covenant law (chs. 20–23) and its ratification (ch. 24). Part of this narrative is Israel's constant complaining to God, which in chapters 32–34 becomes full-blown idolatrous rebellion, followed by judgment and renewal of the covenant.

The book concludes with a final moment of narrative (40:34–38) in which God's glory (his presence) fills the tabernacle, the last essential act of preparation, thus making the people ready for their pilgrimage to the promised land. Note especially how the two parts of this short scene anticipate the next two books of the Pentateuch: The glory of the Lord filling the tabernacle/Tent of Meeting leads directly into Leviticus, where God speaks to Moses (and thus to the people) from the Tent of Meeting and gives instructions on the uses of the tabernacle (Lev 1:1; "Tent of Meeting" and "tabernacle" are used interchangeably thereafter), and the cloud reappears in the narrative early in Numbers, to give guidance when Israel finally breaks camp and sets out toward the promised land (Num 9:15–23).

The parts of the law enclosed in the Exodus narrative include the Ten Commandments (ch. 20), the Book of the Covenant (chs. 21–23)—various laws dealing mostly with relationships among the people—and the instructions regarding the tabernacle (chs. 25–31), followed by its construction and implementation (35:1–40:33).

## SPECIFIC ADVICE FOR READING EXODUS

Any sense of confusion as you read this book may be lessened greatly if you have a sense of the why of its overall structure. Why especially the instructions about and construction of the tabernacle in *this* narrative? Why not wait until Leviticus, where it would seem to fit better? The answer is that Exodus narrates the crucial matters that define Israel as a people in relationship to their God, Yahweh. As you read, therefore, watch especially for the three absolutely defining moments in Israel's history, which cause this narrative with its embedding of portions of the law to make sense: (1) God's miraculous deliverance of his people from slavery, (2) the return of the presence of God as distinguishing his people from all other peoples on the earth, and (3) the gift of the law as the means of establishing his covenant with them.

First, the crucial defining moment, and the one referred to over and over again throughout both the Old Testament and the New, is the exodus itself. Israel is repeatedly reminded that “it was because the LORD loved you and kept the oath he swore to your forefathers that he brought you out with a mighty hand and redeemed you from the land of slavery, from the power of Pharaoh” (Deut 7:8); Israel itself repeatedly affirms, “The LORD brought us out of Egypt with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm” (Deut 26:8).

Watch for the ways the narrative highlights this event—that the story of Moses is given solely with his role in the exodus in view; that Israel’s desperately hopeless situation is overcome by God’s miraculous intervention on their behalf; that this is God’s victory above all else, over both Pharaoh and the gods he represents; that God’s victory is commemorated with the first of two celebratory hymns in the Pentateuch (15:1–21; cf. Deut 31:30–32:43), emphasizing his unrivaled greatness and his triumph in the holy war. Yahweh here “adopts” Israel as his *firstborn son*, who is to be set free so that “he may worship me” (Exod 4:22–23). Notice finally in this regard how the narrative is interrupted twice, on either side of the actual exodus (12:1–28; 12:43–13:16), in order to give instructions for the Passover (the annual celebration of the exodus) and for the consecration of the firstborn male (as a reminder of God’s rescue of them as his firstborn while protecting their own firstborn).

Second, the divine presence, lost in Eden, is now restored as the central feature of Israel’s existence. This theme begins with the call of Moses at “the mountain of God” (3:1), where he did not dare “look at God” (3:6). It is picked up again in chapter 19, where the people encamp “in front of the mountain” (19:2) and experience a spectacular theophany (a visible manifestation of God), accompanied by warnings against touching the mountain. The awesome nature of this encounter with the living God is further highlighted by the ascending and descending of Moses “up to God” (19:3, 8, 20) and “down to the people” (19:7, 14, 25).

The pivotal nature of this motif can be seen especially in chapters 25–40 and helps to explain the repetition about the tabernacle on either side of chapters 32–34. For the tabernacle was to assume the role of “the Tent of Meeting” (40:6) and was thus to function as the place where Israel’s God would dwell in their midst (after he “left” the mountain, as

it were). Thus the debacle in the desert (ch. 32) is followed by Moses’ pleading for Yahweh not to abandon them, for “if your *Presence* does not go with us . . . what else will distinguish me and your people from all the other people on the face of the earth?” (33:15–16, emphasis added; later identified in Isa 63:7–14 as the Holy Spirit). Notice, finally, that Exodus concludes with God’s glory covering the tabernacle/Tent of Meeting, which means the Israelites are now ready for their journey to the promised land. At the same time, these final chapters (25–40) prepare the way especially for the regulations for worship and sacrifice that appear in the next book, Leviticus.

Third, there is the giving of the law with its centerpiece of the Ten Commandments (ch. 20), followed by the Book of the Covenant (chs. 21–24). These laws together focus on Israel’s relationship with God and with one another, the latter as an expression of their living out God’s character in those relationships. This first expression of the law in the narrative of Exodus thus prepares the way for its further elaboration in the final three books of the Pentateuch. On the nature of these laws and how they function in Israel, see *How to 1*, pp. 154–58.

It is also important to note here that these laws are patterned after ancient covenants known as “suzerainty treaties,” where a conqueror made a treaty with the conquered in which he benefited them with his protection and care as long as they would abide by the treaty stipulations. There are six parts to such covenants:

1. Preamble, which identifies the giver of the covenant (“the LORD your God,” 20:2)
2. Prologue, which serves as a reminder of the relationship of the suzerain to the people (“who brought you out of Egypt,” 20:2)
3. Stipulations, which are various laws/obligations on the part of the people (20:3–23:19; 25:1–31:18)
4. Document clause, which provides for periodic reading and relearning of the covenant
5. Sanctions, which describe the blessings and curses as incentives for obedience
6. List of witnesses to the covenant

You will note that only the first three of these six covenant ingredients are found in Exodus. It is only the first portion of the full

covenant that continues on in Leviticus and Numbers and finally concludes at the end of Deuteronomy. Nevertheless, already in Exodus the key elements of the covenant are evident—(1) the revelation of who God is and what he wants from his people, and (2) the enumeration of obedience as the path of covenant loyalty and thus of maintaining its blessings.

## A WALK THROUGH EXODUS

### □ 1:1–2:25 *The Setting: Growth and Oppression of Israel in Egypt*

Here you find the two primary narratives that comprise the setting for the exodus: (1) the multiplication and subjection of the Israelites under Pharaoh, including infanticide in a vain attempt to control their population (ch. 1); (2) enter Moses, an Israelite who grows up as a privileged Egyptian but sides with his own people (2:1–15). Years later, as an escaped elderly outlaw settled in Sinai (vv. 16–22), he is a most unlikely candidate for the role of deliverer of Israel (vv. 23–25), picking up a central motif from Genesis.

### □ 3:1–6:27 *The Call and Commission of Moses*

Watch for several important features in this narrative: God's revelation of himself to the unsuspecting Moses, including the disclosure of his name (Yahweh, "the one who causes to exist"; translated in small capitals [LORD] in most English versions); God's repeated announcement that he has seen the misery of his people in Egypt and intends to deliver them by his mighty power; Moses' fourfold "thanks but no thanks" response to the call; and his first encounter with Pharaoh, which leads to increased oppression and Israel's rejection of Moses. The startling episode in 4:24–26 reminds us that Moses as an Israelite father had not even circumcised his own son, so poorly was he prepared for this task.

### □ 6:28–15:21 *The Miraculous Deliverance from Bondage*

This narrative is in four parts, each blending into the next. Watch for them as you read. First is the confrontation with Pharaoh (6:28–11:10), which begins with Aaron's staff becoming a serpent and swallowing those of the Egyptian sorcerers (perhaps echoing the curse of

the serpent in Eden), followed by nine plagues and the announcement of the tenth; each of these strikes at the heart of Egyptian idolatry and arrogance.

The second part (12:1–30) is a careful weaving together of the institution of the Passover and the actual narrative of the tenth plague. The reason for the instruction here is that the Passover meal is to be an annual celebration in which the momentous event of deliverance is recounted. Notice also the foreshadowing of redemption through the shedding of blood, which in the New Testament happens when God's "firstborn" sheds his blood (Col 1:15–20), as he assumes the role of the lamb and thus lives out this narrative in reverse.

Part 3 is the account of the exodus itself (12:31–14:31). Note especially how reminders of the first two parts are carefully woven into this narrative: It begins with additional Passover regulations and the law of the firstborn; the actual crossing of the Red Sea involves one final confrontation with Pharaoh—and ends with the demise of his whole army. Here also you are introduced to the *grumbling* motif (14:10–12; cf. 5:21) that will become the main theme of the next section of narrative.

Part 4 is the celebratory song of Moses, Israel, and Miriam (15:1–21). Note that it begins as a celebration of the triumph of God the Warrior over Pharaoh and his gods (vv. 1–12) and concludes by anticipating the same victory in the conquest of Canaan (vv. 13–16) and Yahweh's future settled presence on Zion (vv. 17–18; cf. Ps 68). It may be helpful to note how often this aspect of God's victory continued to be celebrated in Israel's hymns (Neh 9:9–11; Pss 66:5–7; 78:12–13; 106:8–12; 114:3, 5; 136:10–15).

### □ 15:22–18:27 *The Journey to Mount Sinai*

The first thing you meet after Israel's great deliverance is a series of three episodes in the desert in which the people grumble against Moses and thus test God (15:22–17:7); these episodes foreshadow many such moments throughout the rest of the story. This is followed by their first encounter with opposition along the way (17:8–16), which also anticipates future encounters of this kind, as well as the future leadership of Joshua. The story of Moses as he takes Jethro's advice about shared leadership, especially for judging (ch. 18), not only prepares for the later organization of the tribes but also for many of the laws in the Book of the Covenant (21:1–23:19; e.g., 21:6, 22; 22:8–9).

□ **19:1–24:11** *The Covenant at Sinai*

The prelude (ch. 19) is especially significant to the narrative. Note how it begins (vv. 3–6). Here God combines his deliverance of Israel “on eagles’ wings” (v. 4) with the call to obedience and his adoption of them as his own treasured possession (much of the language in these verses is picked up by New Testament writers with reference to the church). The rest takes the form of a great theophany, with the reminder of the awful distance between the holy and living God and his people.

Note also that God speaks the Ten Commandments (the “Ten Words,” 20:1–17) directly to the people (20:18–21)—a sign of their primacy. Here fundamental responsibilities to both God and neighbor are addressed in proper order (first “vertical,” then “horizontal”). When the people plead for indirect communication with God, the first order of business is to repeat the injunction against idolatry (20:22–26).

The Book of the Covenant (chs. 21–23) gives specifics as to what the Ten Words mean in practice. Note that they primarily cover various aspects of societal living—treatment of slaves/servants (standing first in order and in stark contrast to their conditions in Egypt), compensations and penalties for injuries, property law, rape, fairness in dealings with others, and worship. They conclude with a promise of divine guidance and the eventual conquest of Canaan, predicated on the people’s obedience to the covenant (23:20–33). The covenant is ratified by Israel’s consent, the sprinkling of blood, and a theophanic meal for Israel’s elders in the presence of God (24:1–11).

□ **24:12–31:18** *Instructions regarding the Tabernacle*

As you read these instructions, keep in mind the reason for their many and very precise details—that the tabernacle will be the place of God’s presence among them. This not only is said expressly (25:8, 22; cf. Lev 16:2), but it also accounts for the order of the instructions. The ark, where Yahweh dwells between the cherubim (25:22; cf. Lev 16:2), stands in first place, followed by the table on which will sit “the bread of the Presence” (25:30). All the rest of the furnishings, including the bronze altar and the priests’ attire, are predicated on the primary reality that Yahweh has chosen to dwell here on earth in the midst of his people. Note, for example, that the reason for the priests’ attire is “to

give him/them dignity and honor” (28:2, 40). And when you come to Leviticus, you will see that the reason for the bronze altar is for sacrifices, so that the priests may approach Yahweh on behalf of the people. Note how this section ends with a renewal of the Sabbath commandment, which is related especially to Yahweh’s “rest” (repeated here because this is God’s gift to former slaves who worked all day, every day of the week).

□ **32:1–34:35** *Rebellion, Covenant Breaking, Covenant Renewal*

Note the contrast: While Moses is atop Sinai receiving instructions for the place of Yahweh’s dwelling among them, his brother is below, leading the people in constructing and worshiping idols (32:1–26)—although note that they are allegedly worshiping Yahweh (v. 5). Punishment (32:27–29) is followed by Moses’ intercession for the people, thus securing God’s promise that his own Presence will accompany them and thus distinguish them from all other peoples (32:30–33:23). This is the significance of including here the brief narratives about the Tent of Meeting (33:7–11) and the (foretaste) vision of God’s glory (33:18–23). In chapter 34, the covenant is renewed (vv. 1–28; a brief condensation of the Book of the Covenant [chs. 21–23] is included) in the context of another significant theophany. The language of Yahweh’s self-revelation in verses 4–7 is one of the more important moments in the biblical story and is appealed to throughout the rest of the Old Testament. The concluding narrative—having to do with Moses emerging from the Tent of Meeting with a face that radiates God’s glory (34:29–35; cf. 2 Cor 3)—anticipates the glory that will descend on the tabernacle when it is finished (40:34–38).

□ **35:1–39:43** *The Construction of the Tabernacle and Its Furnishings*

This lengthy repetition of the matters from chapters 25–31 serves further to highlight the significance of the tabernacle as the place of Yahweh’s presence. Note that the order changes slightly so that the tabernacle will be in place before the symbol of the Presence (namely, the ark) is constructed. But it begins with the Sabbath command (35:1–3). Even something as important as the construction of the tabernacle must not supersede the gift of Sabbath.

□ 40:1–38 *The Tabernacle Is Set Up and the Glory Descends*

Note how this final event in Exodus follows the preceding pattern: Instructions on setting up the tabernacle (vv. 1–16), followed by the implementation (vv. 17–33). All of this so that the glory of Yahweh—the same glory that had so impressed the Israelites when it was seen on Mount Sinai—might fill the tabernacle (v. 34; cf. 1 Kgs 8:10–11), taking the form of a pillar of cloud by day and fire by night (v. 38), a constant visible reminder of God’s presence with his people.

Exodus plays an especially important role in the rest of the biblical story, since it tells the basic story of God’s saving his people from bondage and of his giving them the law so that they will become the people of his presence. Exodus also serves as a pattern for the promised “second exodus” in Isaiah (esp. chs. 40–66) and thus for Jesus’ own “departure” (exodus) that would be accomplished in Jerusalem (Luke 9:30, spoken in the presence of Moses[!] and Elijah).



# Leviticus

## ORIENTING DATA FOR LEVITICUS

- **Content:** various laws having to do with holiness before God and with love of neighbor, including sacrifices, ritual cleanness, and social obligations, as well as laws for the Levites regarding their priestly duties.
- **Emphases:** getting it right with regard to worship, for both people and priests; institution of the priesthood under Aaron; laws protecting ritual cleanness, including atonement for sins (the Day of Atonement); laws regulating sexual relations, family life, punishments for major crimes, festivals, and special years (sabbaths and jubilees)

## OVERVIEW OF LEVITICUS

The title of this book (by way of Latin from the Greek *levitikon*) means “pertaining to the Levites,” which not only aptly describes its basic contents but also gives a clue as to why it is so often unappealing to contemporary readers—not to mention that it has so little narrative (chs. 8–10; 24:10–23 are the exceptions). But with a little help, you can come to a basic understanding of both its contents and its place in the narrative of the Pentateuch—even if the nature of, and reason for, some of the laws themselves may escape you (for this you may wish to consult a good commentary; e.g., Gordon J. Wenham, *The Book of Leviticus* [see *How to I*, p. 249]).

It is important to note that Leviticus picks up precisely where Exodus left off—with the Lord speaking to Moses “from the Tent of Meeting” and saying, “Speak to the Israelites and say . . .” From that point on, the movement from one section to another is signaled by the phrase, “The LORD said to Moses” (4:1; 5:14; 6:1, 8; and so forth). It will be no surprise, then, to discover that the first main part of the book (chs. 1–16,