



A word on the Word

A monthly series on the Bible

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Exodus — microcosm of salvation history

The book of Exodus continues the story of Genesis. Egypt is prospering because of Joseph's foresight and strategy to store food in anticipation of the current famine. Jacob and his sons are living there now and enjoying the benefits of Joseph's favor in the land. However, the Israelites' good fortune quickly turns to despair as a new pharaoh rejects and enslaves them. All seems bleak. Yet, God, in His infinite and mysterious wisdom, has a plan that those in desperation cannot see. God does not intend for the people of Israel to remain in Egypt. He wants to give them their own promised land.

Exodus' structure is a microcosm of salvation history. God's call evokes both acceptance and rejection from the Israelites. In turn, the LORD responds with compassionate discipline and then lovingly rescues His chosen people, working infinitely more than the Israelites could ask or imagine (see Eph. 3:20-21). Exodus is the whole story of the Bible in miniature — the demonstration of God's transformation of profound trials into triumphs, the paradoxical challenge and gift of His justice and mercy, and the universal significance of His providence. "All these things happened to them," St. Paul explains to the Corinthians, "as examples for others, and they were written down as a warning for us. For we live at a time when the end is about to come." (1 Cor. 10:11).

The book of Exodus includes three parts:

1. Exodus 1-12: God liberates the Israelites from slavery in Egypt.
2. Exodus 13-18: God leads His people through the wilderness into safety and a personal encounter with Him.
3. Exodus 19-40: at Mt. Sinai, God establishes a community formed by covenant, law, and worship.

Exodus 1: Egypt

The Israelites have great success as they live in the only area that is not facing a famine. Egyptians look on them with favor because of Joseph's close ties to the pharaoh. However, a new pharaoh rises to power who knows nothing of Joseph. He turns on the Hebrew people and places them in brutal enslavement.

Exodus 2-4: God chooses Moses

God calls Moses to free the Israelites from slavery. Moses is not an extraordinary man. He stutters and does not appear to be a powerful leader. However, from a burning bush, God calls him to a humanly impossible mission and reveals His name to him — "I AM" (3:12-22). Moses shudders, knowing he is on holy ground. He has a humble fear of God. As God commissions him to challenge Pharaoh to free the Israelites, Moses is stunned. He knows he cannot accomplish this feat in his

own power. At first, he rejects God's call on the grounds of his own inadequacy. However, God promises that He will be with Moses and provide him with everything he needs for the daunting task. Moses accepts, and God gives him Aaron as an assistant — someone who "can speak fluently" (4:14). So, "the people [believe]" Moses and Aaron together "when they [hear] that the LORD had given heed" to their misery (4:31).

Exodus 5-12: Confrontation with Pharaoh

Moses and Aaron boldly approach Pharaoh with a message from the LORD, the God of Israel: "Let my people go so that they may celebrate a festival to me in the wilderness" (5:1). At first, a surly Pharaoh makes the Israelites work even harder and for longer hours. The Israelites complain to Moses and Aaron that they have brought more trouble upon them. This leads Moses to doubt himself and his divinely appointed mission: "Why did you ever send me?" he complains to God (5:22). The LORD promises Moses that Pharaoh will indeed let the Israelites go by the hand of the One who "appeared to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob as God Almighty," and "also established [His] covenant with them, to give them the land of Canaan" (6:3-4).

In the subsequent chapters, God sends a series of plagues — ten in all — as a demonstration of His power to save His people. In the last and most terrible plague, God slays "every firstborn in the land of Egypt" — both humans and animals (11:5). However, He protects the Israelites by means of the first "Passover" — a sign of His mercy. God spares the firstborn within the houses of those Israelites who wipe their doorposts and lintels with lamb's blood (ch. 12). God also instructs the Israelites to eat a meal of "unleavened bread," which foreshadows the Eucharist in the New Testament. In both cases, God shows His mercy to those who humbly obey Him and stand ready — with their loins girded, sandals on their feet, and staff in their hand — to follow wherever He leads (12:11).

Exodus 13-15: Escape from Egypt, across the Red Sea

God forms the very identity of Israel and the Church, and He calls this people to remember how He rescues them from slavery by His mighty hand (13:3). They are to tell the story in perpetuity to their children as they celebrate the festival of unleavened bread: "the LORD brought us out of Egypt" (13:8, 14).

As the Israelites escape Egypt, the LORD parts the waters of the Red Sea, leading them "out of their bondage ... into the land of promise." We recall this rescue from the sea at each celebration of Holy Baptism (*BCP*, p. 360). The Israelites are our spiritual "ancestors," St. Paul explains to the Corinthians, "baptized into Moses in the cloud and in the sea" (1 Cor. 10:1-2). Therefore, the Song of Moses, recorded in the American *Book of Common Prayer* as Cantic 8, is also our song.

"I will sing to the Lord, for he is lofty and uplifted; the horse and its rider has he hurled into the sea.

The Lord is my strength and my refuge; the Lord has become my Savior ...

The chariots of Pharaoh and his army has he hurled into the sea; the finest of those who bear armor have been drowned in the Red Sea ...

With your constant love, you led the people you redeemed; with your might, you brought them in safety to your holy dwelling ...

The Lord shall reign forever and forever.

Glory to the Father, and to the Son, and to the Holy Spirit: as it was in the beginning, is now, and will be forever. Amen (p. 85).

Exodus 16-40: Another covenant and God's faithfulness

The remainder of Exodus demonstrates the same pattern. God graciously saves the Israelites by His mighty hand as they learn to listen carefully to His voice and do what is right in His eyes (15:26). St. Paul teaches that Jesus Christ Himself was "the spiritual rock" from which the Israelites drank in the wilderness (1 Cor. 10:4; cf., Exod. 17), a tangible indication of God's faithfulness in the midst of adversity. If we trust Him, the LORD will heal us (Exod. 15:26) and feed us with our fill of bread (ch. 16). "He will not allow you to be tested beyond your power to remain firm," writes Paul; "at the time you are put to the test, he will give you the strength to endure it, and so provide you with a way out" (1 Cor. 10:13).

In this light, we can understand God's renewed covenant with Israel in the wilderness of Sinai. The LORD calls to Moses from the mountain, reminds him that He elected Israel as "a priestly kingdom and a holy nation," consecrates the people to Himself (19:6), and then gives them the Ten Commandments — "written with the finger of God" (31:18) — along with a host of other laws concerning worship, property, justice, and much else (chs. 20-23). In response, all the people promise, "All the words that the LORD has spoken we will do" (24:3), and God offers to dwell among them in a tabernacle (25:8).

Of course, the Israelites struggle with faithfulness, and before they construct the ark (chs. 37-39), they erect, worship, and sacrifice to a golden calf. God plans to bring disaster on these people, but Moses intercedes on their behalf and averts disaster (32:14). Afterward, when the people renew their covenant with God, He communicates His mighty providence in both His mercy and His justice (34:6-7). Finally, when Israel builds the tabernacle, "the glory of the LORD" fills it, marked by a cloud above; and the Israelites proceed on their journey through the desert, following a cloud by day and a fire in the cloud by night, "before the eyes of all" (40:34-38).