

## Introduction

# Exodus



## ***'A Road Out' for God's People***

Early World	Patriarchs	Egypt & Exodus	Desert Wanderings	Conquest & Judges	Royal Kingdom	Divided Kingdom	Exile	Return	Maccabean Revolt	Messianic Fulfillment	The Church

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## **Exodus Introductory Material**

### **The Prototypical Faith Journey: An Age-Old Story of Redemption and Revelation**

Christians refer to the second book of the Old Testament as Exodus, from its Greek Septuagint title, *Exodos*, which means “a road out of.” This expresses the main theme of the book—the mass migration of the people of Israel out of northern Egypt. There are a surprisingly large number of events in the Old Testament story of the Exodus that directly relate to contemporary Christianity, including the idea that the spiritual life is a kind of pilgrimage. For more than 3,000 years, the Judeo-Christian tradition has looked on the Exodus as the prototypical faith journey and on the Promised Land as heaven. The Hebrew title for the work is taken from the opening words of the book—in this case, *we’elleh shemot*, meaning “these are the names” (*Ex* 1:1)—and the phrase refers to the names of the children of Israel who had moved to Egypt at the conclusion of the book of Genesis. The book of Exodus deliberately links its story to that narrative, and continues to follow the Israelites on their journey out of Egypt. The book itself ends with a description of the glory of the Lord dwelling among his people in a cloud by day and in a pillar of fire by night, and with the descendants of Israel still journeying toward the Promised Land.

A profound book with a gripping story, Exodus takes for granted—and constantly reminds readers—that God is the powerful force behind all of the supernatural events recorded in its pages. Underlying everything is God’s revelation of himself to his chosen people through his name, his actions, and his laws. He begins by revealing his holy name—“I AM WHO I AM” (*Ex* 3:13-14)—and his divine Fatherhood (*Ex* 4:22). Then God turns his attention to delivering the Israelites from bondage in Egypt and guiding them to safety (*Ex* 13:21). When they’re wandering in the desert, God provides them with food and drink (*Ex* 16:1—17:7), and he instructs them in the way of wisdom, which includes his gift of the Ten Commandments (*Ex* 20:1-17) as well as teaching them the correct manner to worship him on the sabbath (*Ex* 31:12-17). At crucial moments throughout the book of Exodus, God reveals intimate details concerning who he is and how he acts—information about his glory, his divine mercy, and his steadfast love (*Ex* 34:5-7). At the very heart of the story of Exodus is a God who’s faithful to the covenant promises he swore to Abraham. The central message of the book of Exodus is that the Creator of the universe is a loving God intent on fulfilling his promises to the people he’s chosen to call his own.

## Christian Perspective

The Exodus is an inexhaustible source of imagery, and it's an event that foreshadows and parallels the ultimate act of redemption and revelation in Jesus Christ. The Church always has seen layers of spiritual meaning surrounding the historical events of the Exodus. The Ten Commandments, which are at the heart of the ethics of the people of Israel, also are at the heart of Christian teaching about morality and life (*Mt 19:16-19* and *Rom 13:8-10*). The apostles, early Church Fathers, and countless other Christian thinkers have seen in the events recounted in the book of Exodus the Spirit-inspired signs pointing to God's mighty act of redemption in Jesus Christ. The deliverance from bondage in Egypt prefigures Christians' deliverance from the slavery of sin. The crossing of the Red Sea "baptizes" the people of Israel into Moses just as sacramental Baptism incorporates Christians into the body of Christ, the Church (*1 Cor 10:1-2*). The Passover feast celebrates the Exodus itself and foreshadows the sacrament of the Eucharist, in which Christians feast on the body and blood of Jesus Christ, the true Passover Lamb of God, and are delivered from death to life (*1 Cor 5:7* and *1 Pet 1:18-19*). The manna in wilderness, the water from the rock, the bronze serpent, and many other details in Exodus are seen as types of the full revelation given only with the Incarnation of Jesus Christ and the arrival of the Gospel. The tabernacle is a type of the humanity of Jesus, as well as of the heavenly sanctuary and of the Church, the body of Christ (*Heb 9:1-28*).

## Authorship

The authorship of the book of Exodus poses an interesting problem for Scripture scholars, and one that isn't easily resolved. The traditional view is that the book was written by Moses, but there's speculation that it's the work of multiple authors. The idea of several authors is fairly recent (it was introduced within roughly the past 200 years) and has undergone modifications. For obvious reasons, such a theory denies Mosaic authorship and instead envisions the book of Exodus coming together over a long period of time, between approximately 900 and 400 B.C. Yet even many advocates of this idea grant that the religious traditions reflected in Exodus are much older than their written form. There's little agreement among Scripture scholars about which passages originate from which sources, who edited them, when, or why.

The basic premise of the multiple-source theory holds that the book of Exodus is a composite woven from several different Hebrew sources, each with its own separate history and author or authors. According to this theory, the story line of Exodus may have come from two narratives written during the period of the Israelite monarchy. One of these alleged narratives referred to God as "Yahweh" (this is called the "J" source), and the other referred to God as "Elohim" (the "E" source). In addition, the laws given on Mount Sinai are surmised to have come from yet a third source, one focused on priestly legislation written after the Babylonian Exile (this source is labeled "P"). Later versions of this theory argue that these various sources were oral, not written, and that they were combined before or during the process of being committed to writing.

In contrast to these hypotheses is the view that's dominated both the Jewish and Christian traditions for many centuries—namely that Moses is the author not only of Exodus but of all five books of the Law (Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy). Collectively, these five books are known as the Pentateuch or Torah. According to the book of Exodus itself, Moses

was literate (*Ex 17:14*), and he wrote down the laws of the covenant revealed by God at Mount Sinai (*Ex 24:4*). There are other Old Testament passages that attest to Mosaic authorship of the Pentateuch as well (*Num 33:2* and *Deut 31:9*). In this, they reflect the view of Mosaic authorship universally shared by Jews and Christians until the early 19th century.

Modern scholarship hasn't dismissed the idea that Moses wrote the first five books of the Old Testament. While it would have been impossible for Moses to write about his own death and the circumstances following it (*Deut 34:5-12*), respectful adherence to the traditional view of Mosaic authorship of the Pentateuch doesn't rule out the possibility that some later editing occurred. The Catholic Church's official affirmation of the "substantive Mosaic authenticity and integrity of the Pentateuch" was promulgated by the Pontifical Biblical Commission in 1906. More recent statements from the Magisterium reflect prudent flexibility in the way that the Catholic Church maintains the traditional view of Mosaic authorship, and many non-Catholic scholars, both Protestant and Jewish, accept and defend Mosaic authorship. Those interested in further study are referred to Kenneth Kitchen's book, *On the Reliability of the Old Testament*, and to Scott Hahn's *A Father Who Keeps His Promises*.

## Date

If the claim of Mosaic authorship is accurate, then this necessarily means that the book of Exodus must be dated to the time of Moses. Reading biblical chronology literally and counting back 480 years from 966 B.C., the fourth year of King Solomon's reign (*1 Kings 6:1*), sets the time of Moses and the Exodus about 1400 B.C. (although another chronology places Moses and these events somewhat later, about 1200 B.C.). Additional testimony to the antiquity of Exodus is provided by comparative studies that show marked similarities between the Covenant Code in the twenty-first through twenty-third chapters of the book of Exodus and other ancient Near Eastern legal documents such as the Babylonian Code of Hammurabi (believed to have been written about 1700 B.C.). Similarly, the Mosaic description of tabernacle architecture reflects the use of movable tent-sanctuaries in ancient Egypt during the second millennium B.C. It's known that the covenant procedures described at Mount Sinai were common at that same time. And the author of Exodus displays detailed familiarity with local conditions, something that would be highly unlikely a thousand years after the events being recounted—such things as the agricultural calendar of Egypt (*Ex 9:31-32*) and the fact that acacia wood could be acquired on the Sinai Peninsula (*Ex 25:10*). In short, Exodus reads like a book that comes from the time in which it claims to be written, rather than reading like one coming from a later period and written by an author far removed from the places, events, and institutions described.

When considering who really wrote the book of Exodus, readers are reminded that scholarly conjecture about the authorship of the Pentateuch remains just that—conjecture and not fact. It's conjecture that stands against the plain sense of both the Old and New Testament, thousands of years of Jewish and Christian tradition, and the repeated magisterial teaching of the Church. Whatever the case regarding the authorship of Exodus, the Church, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, teaches in *Dei Verbum* (the Second Vatican Council's Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation) that the true author is God himself:

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Those divinely revealed realities which are contained and presented in sacred Scripture have been committed to writing under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit. For holy mother Church, relying on the belief of the apostles (see *Jn* 20:31, *2 Tim* 3:16, *2 Pet* 1:19-20, and *2 Pet* 3:15-16), holds that the books of both the Old and New Testaments in their entirety, with all their parts, are sacred and canonical because written under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, they have God as their author and have been handed on as such to the Church herself. In composing the sacred books, God chose men and while employed by him they made use of their powers and abilities, so that with him acting in them and through them, they, as true authors, consigned to writing everything and only those things which he wanted.

Therefore, since everything asserted by the inspired authors or sacred writers must be held to be asserted by the Holy Spirit, it follows that the books of Scripture must be acknowledged as teaching solidly, faithfully and without error that truth which God wanted put into sacred writings for the sake of salvation.

### **Themes**

The book of Exodus describes how the enslaved tribes of Israel become the covenant nation of the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob—a God who reveals his name as “I AM WHO I AM.” The theology of Exodus then follows the epic story of a journey from Egypt to Mount Sinai, from national deliverance to covenant communion.

The first movement of the book of Exodus focuses on the theme of deliverance in the first through eighteenth chapters. The story deals with the awesome rescue of the Israelites from Egypt, based on God’s promises to Abraham and his descendants. God calls Moses to lead the people of Israel to freedom. From the scene of this extraordinary drama, God guides the people toward the wilderness of Sinai, with the intention of ultimately bringing them to the Promised Land of Canaan. Before deliverance is complete, Pharaoh’s army attempts one final assault. In response, God parts the waters of the Red Sea, and the Hebrews miraculously escape. When the chariots of Pharaoh pursue the people, God drowns the Egyptian army in a victory that’s been celebrated ever since. Soon, the Israelites are at war again—this time with the Amalekites—and God once more comes to the aid of his chosen people, granting them another victory.

The second main movement of the book of Exodus begins after God at last brings the Israelites to Mount Sinai. The latter half of the book—the nineteenth through fortieth chapters—focuses on the making, breaking and renewal of the covenant between God and the Israelites. At Mount Sinai, the people enter into a covenant relationship with God, who’s brought them out of bondage in Egypt, and God and the Israelites are united in a bond of sacred kinship and mutual commitment. Set forth in the laws given at Mount Sinai, the covenant terms initially consist of the Decalogue, or Ten Commandments, and a code of social and religious ethics. After the people commit a terrible act of apostasy by idolizing a golden calf that they themselves have created, additional legislation is given to the Israelites to serve as a reminder of the nation’s sin. The Church sees in this a reminder as well of the reality of original sin that can only be healed and forgiven through the grace of Jesus Christ.

The final portion of the book of Exodus also deals with a great mass of laws regarding the construction and furnishing of the portable sanctuary known as the tabernacle. Here God will dwell with his family, the people with whom he keeps his covenant. When he institutes these laws, God is asking the people of Israel to reflect his own purity and goodness, a covenantal requirement that will shape their life and liturgy for all time.

## **Structure**

The complex story of Exodus may be structured in various ways. Some analyses highlight theological themes with a view to the two great actions of God—the divine redemption of Israel (1:1—18:27) and the Divine Revelation given to Israel (19:1—40:38). Other analyses follow a geographical outline according to movements of Moses and the nation of Israel. Seen this way, the book of Exodus is a drama in three parts—Israel in Egypt (1:1—13:16), Israel in the wilderness (13:17—18:27), and Israel assembled at the foot of Mount Sinai (19:1—40:38).

## **Outline of Exodus**

### **1. Divine Redemption and Deliverance from Egypt (1:1—18:27)**

- A. Israel Groans in Egypt (1:1-22)
- B. Moses' Early Years (2:1—4:31)
- C. Confrontation with Pharaoh (5:1—7:13)
- D. Ten Plagues (7:14—11:10)
- E. Passover (12:1-51)
- F. Exodus (13:1—15:27)
- G. Journey to Mount Sinai (16:1—18:27)

### **2. Divine Revelation at Sinai (19:1—40:38)**

- A. Covenant at Mount Sinai (19:1—24:18)
- B. Pattern of the Tabernacle (25:1—31:18)
- C. Golden Calf Apostasy (32:1—33:23)
- D. Renewal of the Covenant (34:1-35)
- E. Construction of the Tabernacle (35:1—40:33)
- F. God Dwells in the Tabernacle (40:34-38)

## Catechism Connections

- To learn the three criteria that the Church teaches are essential to interpreting Scripture in accordance with the Holy Spirit, see paragraphs 112-114 of the *Catechism of the Catholic Church (CCC)*.
- For more information about how Old Testament figures and events serve as “types” (or prototypes) of the fulfillment of God’s plan in the person of Jesus Christ, see *CCC* 128-130.

## Rome to Home

Pope John Paul II wrote that the Bible is the “path to happiness” because through the words of Scripture God reveals fundamental morality.

In the Bible, God not only reveals himself but also the path to happiness. This is a theme that regards not only believers but, in a certain sense, every person of good will. Through the Bible, God speaks and reveals himself and indicates the solid basis and certain orientation for human behavior. The fundamental behaviors of biblical morality are: knowing God, the Father of Our Lord Jesus Christ; recognizing his infinite goodness; knowing with a grateful and sincere soul that ‘all good giving and every perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of lights’; discovering in the gifts that God has given us the duties that he has entrusted to us; and acting in full awareness of our responsibilities in this regard. The Bible presents to us the inexhaustible riches of this revelation of God and of his love for humanity.

—speaking to the 2004 assembly  
of the Pontifical Biblical Commission

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