

EXODUS STUDY NOTES

THE BIBLE PROJECT

Exodus is the second book of the Bible, and it picks up the biblical story line right where Genesis left off. Abraham's grandson Jacob and his family of seventy made their way down to Egypt, where Joseph, one of Jacob's sons, had been elevated to second in command over Egypt. So the family lived and grew in Egypt as a safe haven for many years.

After a few hundred years, the story of Exodus begins. The word "exodus" refers to the major event that takes place in the first half of the book, Israel's exodus from Egypt. The book also has a second half that takes place at the foot of Mount Sinai. For now, we will focus on the first half, in which centuries have passed and the Israelites "were fruitful and multiplied and filled the land" (**Exodus 1:7**).

This phrase is a deliberate echo of the blessing God gave humanity back in the garden (**Genesis 1:28**), which reminds us of the bigger story so far. When humanity forfeited God's blessing through sin and rebellion, God's response was to choose Abraham's family as the vehicle through which he would restore his blessing to the world.

WHO WROTE THE BOOK OF EXODUS?

Many Jewish and Christian traditions hold that Moses is the author of Exodus. However, authorship is not explicitly stated within the book.

CONTEXT

The events described in Exodus take place in Egypt and on the Sinai Peninsula, starting before Moses' birth until Israel's arrival at Mount Sinai.

LITERARY STYLES

Exodus is written as narrative and contains occasional poetic and discourse sections.

...and he has not hidden his face from him
but his heart, when he cried to him,
from afar comes my praise in the great
congregation
my voice, I will perform before those
who hear him
The afflicted shall eat and be satisfied
those who seek him shall praise the
Lord!
May your hearts live forever!
Blessed be that day when all the bones of
Israel shall be gathered together

The Lord is My Shepherd
A Psalm of David
23 The Lord is my shepherd, I shall
not want
He makes me lie down in green
pastures
He leads me beside still waters
He restores my soul
He leads me in paths of righteousness
for his name's sake

KEY THEMES

- God's confrontation with evil brings justice and rescue
- God's desire and plan to dwell among his people
- God's faithfulness to his promises and commitment to an often faithless people
- Sin and idolatry as the greatest threats to the covenant promises and blessings

STRUCTURE

The structure of Exodus is divided into five parts. Chapters 1-15 detail Israel's slavery in Egypt, God confronting Pharaoh through Moses, and Israel's deliverance. Chapters 16-40 outline Israel's grumbling, rebellion, and covenant at Sinai.

EXODUS 1-4: ISRAEL'S ENSLAVEMENT UNDER PHARAOH

The new Pharaoh, however, does not see Israel as a blessing. He thinks this growing Israelite immigrant group is a threat to his power. So, just as in Genesis, humanity rebels against God. Pharaoh attempts to destroy the Israelites by brutally enslaving them and using them in hard physical labor. It's bad, but it gets worse when he orders that all Israelite boys be drowned in the Nile River.

This Pharaoh is the worst character in the Bible so far, and his kingdom epitomizes humanity's rebellion against God. Pharaoh has so redefined good and evil according to his own interests that murder of innocent children becomes "good." Egypt has become worse than Babylon, and Israel cries out for help against this new form of evil. God responds by first turning Pharaoh's evil plot upside-down. An Israelite mother throws her boy into the Nile, protected inside a basket, and the child floats right into the Pharaoh's own family. This boy is named Moses, and he eventually grows up to become the man God will use to defeat Pharaoh.

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In the famous story of the burning bush, God appears to Moses and commissions him to go to Pharaoh and order him to release the Israelites. God says that he knows Pharaoh will resist. But God plans to bring his justice down upon Egypt in the form of plagues and harden Pharaoh's heart.

EXODUS 5-15: THE TEN PLAGUES AND PHARAOH'S HARDENING HEART

The confrontation between God and Pharaoh is the major focus in this narrative, but what does it mean that God will harden his heart? It is important to read this part of the story closely and in sequence. In Moses and Pharaoh's first encounter, we are told simply that Pharaoh's heart "grew hard," without any implication that God caused it.

God proceeds to send the first set of five plagues, each one confronting Pharaoh and his gods. Each time, Moses offers a chance for Pharaoh to humble himself and let the people go. However, after each plague, we are told that Pharaoh either "hardened his heart," or that his "heart grew hard." He's doing this of his own will. It's only with the second set of five plagues that we begin to hear that God hardened Pharaoh's heart.

The point is that even though God knew Pharaoh would resist his will, God still offered him many chances to do the right thing. Eventually Pharaoh's evil reaches a point of no return, and even his advisors think he has lost his mind. It's at that point that God takes over and bends Pharaoh's evil to his own redemptive purposes. He lures Pharaoh into his own destruction and saves his people.

With the final plague, the night of Passover, God turns the tables on Pharaoh. Just as Pharaoh killed the sons of the Israelites, so God will kill the firstborn sons of Egypt. Unlike Pharaoh, however, God will provide a means of escape through the blood of a lamb.

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Here the story stops and introduces us to the annual Israelite ritual of Passover (Exod. 12-13). On the night before Israel left Egypt, they sacrificed a young, spotless lamb and painted its blood on the doorframe of their house. When the divine plague came over Egypt, the houses covered with the blood of the lamb would be “passed over” and the sons spared. Every year since, the Israelites have reenacted this night to remember and celebrate God’s justice and mercy.

Because of his pride and rebellion, Pharaoh loses his son and is compelled to finally let the Israelites go free. The Israelite slaves make their escape from Egypt, but as soon as they leave, Pharaoh changes his mind. He gathers his army and chases after them for a final showdown, thinking that he will slaughter them by the waters of the sea. However, the Israelites run into the sea and discover they’re walking on dry ground that God has provided. But when Pharaoh pursues them, the waters surge around him, destroying him.

This part of the book of Exodus concludes with the first song of praise in the Bible, called “The Song of the Sea” (**Exod. 15**). The final line declares that “the Lord reigns as king,” and the song retells in poetry what the God’s Kingdom is all about. God is on a mission to confront evil in his world, redeem those enslaved to evil, and bring them to the promised land where his divine presence will live among them. This is what it looks like when God becomes King over his people.

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The afflicted shall eat and be satisfied
those who seek him shall praise the
Lord!
May your hearts live forever!
...all those who desire him shall be saved

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EXODUS 16-18: GRUMBLING IN THE WILDERNESS

After the people sing their song, the story takes a surprising turn. The Israelites trek through the wilderness on their way to Mount Sinai and get really hungry and thirsty. In their distress, they start criticizing Moses and God for rescuing them from Egypt! Even though God graciously provides food and water for his people, these events cast a dark shadow. As readers, we wonder if it is possible that Israel's heart is as hard as Pharaoh's. We're left with that haunting question as we turn to read about Israel's experience at Mount Sinai.

EXODUS 19-31: THE COVENANT AT SINAI

The second half of the book of Exodus picks up right as Moses leads Israel to the foot of Mount Sinai (Exod. 19), where God invites the nation to enter into a covenant relationship. It's here that we reach another key moment in the big storyline of the Bible. This moment develops God's promise to Abraham—that through him and his family God would restore his blessing to all nations (Gen. 12, 15, 17). God says that if the people of Israel obey the terms of the covenant, they will become a "kingdom of priests" (Exod. 19:6), acting as God's representatives to the nations and showing them his character by how they live. In this way, God's justice and mercy will reach the nations.

The people eagerly accept the offer, and God's presence appears on the mountain in the form of a cloud. Moses goes up as the people's representative, and God opens with the basic terms of the covenant, the famous Ten Commandments. These are foundational rules that set up how the Israelites relate to God and to each other. After this comes a collection of fifty-two more commands, which expand on the first ten with more detail. There are laws about Israel's worship and social justice, which shape how Israel was to live differently from the other nations. Moses wrote down all these laws and brought them to the people, who eagerly agreed to the terms of the covenant.

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God then takes the relationship forward another step. He tells Moses that he wants his holy and divine presence to dwell in the midst of Israel. This develops another aspect of God's original covenant promise from the book of Genesis. After humanity's rebellion in the garden, access to God's presence was lost. However, through the family of Abraham, God's presence has become accessible again, first to Israel at Mount Sinai and one day to all nations.

The following seven chapters (**Exod. 25-31**) detail the architectural blueprints of a sacred tent called the tabernacle. There is an outer courtyard with an altar, an outer and inner room in the center of the tent, and inside the inner room—called the most holy space—is a golden box with angelic creatures on it, the ark of the covenant. This ark acts as a "hotspot" for God's presence.

There's a lot of detail in these chapters, but it's important to know that every part has a symbolic value. All of the flowers, angels, gold, and jewels call back to the garden of Eden, the place where God and humans lived together in intimacy. In other words, the tabernacle is a portable Eden where God and Israel can live together in peace. That's how it could have worked, in theory, but things go off course, and Israel breaks the covenant.

EXODUS 32-40: ISRAEL'S WILDERNESS REBELLION

While Moses is up on the mountain receiving the blueprints for the tabernacle, the Israelites are losing patience down in the camp. They ask Moses' brother Aaron to make a golden calf idol so they can worship it as the god who saved them from slavery in Egypt. Even as God's presence is hovering atop the mountain, they are already breaking the first two commandments of the covenant: no idols and no other gods.

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What follows is crucial to the rest of the biblical story and how we understand God's character. God first invites Moses into his anger and pain, venting his feelings and saying he wants to wipe out the entire nation of Israel. After listening, Moses intercedes by appealing to God's character, saying that this would mean going back on his covenant promises to Abraham. Moses also appeals to God's reputation among the nations. What would the Egyptians think if he allowed Israel to die in the wilderness? God accepts Moses' prayer and relents. And while God does bring justice to those who instigated the idolatry, he forgives the nation as a whole and renews the covenant. It's at this point God describes himself to Moses. "The Lord is merciful and gracious, slow to anger, abounding in covenant faithfulness. He forgives sin, but will not leave the wicked unpunished" (**Exod. 34:6-7**). In other words, God is full of mercy, but he must deal with evil if he claims to be good. Above all else, God is faithful to his promises even if it means committing himself to people who are faithless.

After renewing the covenant, God commissions Moses to build the tabernacle, detailed in the next five chapters (**Exod. 35-39**). It all comes together in the final chapter (**Exod. 40**). The tabernacle is finished, and God's glorious presence comes over the tent. Our hopes are high! But as Moses goes to enter the tent, he finds that he is unable to. He is blocked from entering, and the book of Exodus comes to a sudden end.

We see now that Israel's sin has damaged their relationship with God in more ways than we had realized. The book may have opened with Pharaoh's evil threatening Israel, but as the book comes to an end, Israel has become their own worst enemy. The sin and idolatry of God's own people is now the greatest threat to his covenant promises. How is God going to reconcile the conflict between his holy, good presence with the sin and corruption of his own people? That's the question that the next book, Leviticus, sets out to answer.

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but has heard when he cried to him
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BIG IDEA

God rescues the people of Israel from Egypt and invites them into an agreement, or covenant, with him. The people damage their relationship with God, which causes God to recommit to his promise to dwell with them.

and stand in awe of him, all you
offspring of Israel!
For he has not despised or abhorred
the affliction of the afflicted,
and he has not hidden his face from him,
but has heard when he cried to him.
From you comes my praise in the great
congregation;
my vows I will perform before those
who fear him.
The afflicted shall eat and be satisfied;
those who seek him shall praise the
Lord!
May your hearts live forever!
All the ends of the earth shall remember

• I can count all my bone
they stare and gloat over me;
they divide my garments amo

The Lord Is My Shepherd

23

A PSALM OF DAVID

The LORD is my shepherd;
I shall not want.

2 He makes me lie down in green
pastures;
He leads me beside still waters.
3 He restores my soul.
He leads me in paths of righteousness
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they stare and gloat over me;
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who is the generation of those who
seek him.
who seek the face of the God of
Jacob.

Lift up your heads, O gates!
And be lifted up, O ancient doors,
that the King of glory may come in.
Who is this King of glory?
The Lord, strong and mighty,
the Lord, mighty in battle!
Lift up your heads, O gates!
And lift them up, O ancient doors,
that the King of glory may come in.
Who is this King of glory?
The Lord of hosts,
he is the King of glory!

Him will he instruct in the way of
peace,
he should choose.
13 His soul shall abide in well-being,
and his offspring shall inherit the land.
14 The friendship of the Lord is for those
who fear him,
and he makes known to them his
covenant.
15 My eyes are ever toward the Lord,
for he will pluck my feet out of the
net.
16 Turn to me and be gracious to me,
for I am lonely and afflicted.
17 The troubles of my heart are enlarged;
bring me out of my distresses.
18 Consider my affliction and my trouble,
and forgive all my sins.