

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

ca. *circa*, about, approximately

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. 169–75.

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.¹

¹ Gordon D. Fee and Douglas K. Stuart, [*How to Read the Bible Book by Book: A Guided Tour*](#) (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2002), 34–38.