

WELCOME

The Good Book Club:
Exodus



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Exodus

- Where does Exodus fit in the story of the Bible?
- Who / what / where / when of Exodus
- Key themes and structure of Exodus
- How has Exodus been read by other Christians? How can we approach it?

Moses pulled from water, Dura-Europos synagogue fresco



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Exodus in the Hebrew Scriptures

- Exodus is one of first five books of Bible: Torah, Pentateuch
 - Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, Deuteronomy
 - “The Books of Moses”—though he dies at the end of Deuteronomy
- Bulk of Genesis is story of Abraham, Sarah, and their descendants
- Genesis ends with these descendants in Egypt where they have sought food at a time of famine and one of them, Joseph, has risen to power and prominence
- Exodus 1:8-10: “Now a new king arose over Egypt, who did not know Joseph. He said to his people, ‘Look, the Israelite people are more numerous and more powerful than we. Come, let us deal shrewdly with them, or they will increase...’”





When did Exodus happen?

- According to internal chronology of Bible, Exodus happened around 1445 BC
- Pharaoh who enslaves Hebrew people is not named but there is reference to building city of Rameses (1:11), which was built during reign of Ramesses II (1304-1237 BC), so perhaps 1250 BC?
- Evidence in this period that Egypt was a powerful kingdom that brought captives to Egypt and held children of their vassal states hostage (Moses?)
- 'Apiru (also Habiru): Semitic-speaking people who worked on city built by Ramesses II: are these the Hebrews?

Egypt at the time of the Exodus

- A centralized kingdom that relied on the harvest for its legitimacy: developed a hierarchical system of labour to capture the harvest
 - “So Joseph bought all the land of Egypt for Pharaoh. All the Egyptians sold their fields... and the land became Pharaoh’s. As for the people, he made slaves of them from one end of Egypt to another.” (Genesis 47:20-21)
- Food practices are centralized and heavily controlled and rely on storage and slave labour to make the system work
 - “Therefore they set taskmasters over them to oppress them with forced labor. They built supply [storage] cities, Pithom and Rameses, for Pharaoh.... The Egyptians became ruthless in imposing tasks on the Israelites, and made their lives bitter with hard service in mortar and brick and in every kind of field labour. They were ruthless in all the tasks that they imposed on them.” (Exodus 1:11, 14)



Harvest Scenes, Tomb of Menna, ca. 1400-1352 BC, Metropolitan Museum of Art

Did the Exodus happen?

- There is no archaeological evidence to support the idea that several hundred thousand people wandered around Sinai for 40 years
- There is no archaeological evidence of a mass invasion of the Promised Land
- Perhaps the story grew in the telling: what actually happened is a smaller group of people fled Egypt, settled among people living in Canaan, and had a decisive religious influence
 - Moses was a Levite (the priestly class) so perhaps it was the Levites who left Egypt and came to Canaan
- Outside the Bible, there is only circumstantial evidence for what is described in Exodus

Why was Exodus written?

- Exodus was not written to record history as we understand history
- Exodus contains numerous genres of literature within a single book: divine speech, historical narrative, poems / songs, law codes
 - Some of this material is quite different from others: chapter 15 is as if a Shakespearean sonnet dropped in a book of history
- There are likely multiple different authors whose work has been combined into the single book we have today
- Exodus was written to speak larger truths about God and God's people
 - It is a teaching document, not a historical record
 - Its truths are theological, not necessarily historical

When was Exodus written?

- Exodus is about the formation of a people before God and God's action to deliver this people: a message of hope in a time of tumult
- Israel experienced lots of periods like this, particularly during 6th century when foreign powers were threatening Jerusalem and eventually took Israelites into exile
- Perhaps Exodus was written at this time: an apt time to tell a story about deliverance by God of God's people and their formation as a community under the law
- Exodus is a story that reminds people of their distinctiveness and calls them to maintain that identity through relationship with God



Trajectories in Exodus

- What's is Exodus about? Our English title focuses us on chapters 12 to 15 but the movement in the story is more comprehensive than simply fleeing Egypt
- Exodus starts in slavery and ends in worship of God
- Exodus starts with Israel in bondage to Pharaoh and ends in covenant with God
- Exodus moves from enforced construction of buildings for Pharaoh to glad and obedient offering of building for worship of God
- Exodus starts with God's presence hardly being noted in text to God filling the scene at completion of tabernacle



Outline of Exodus

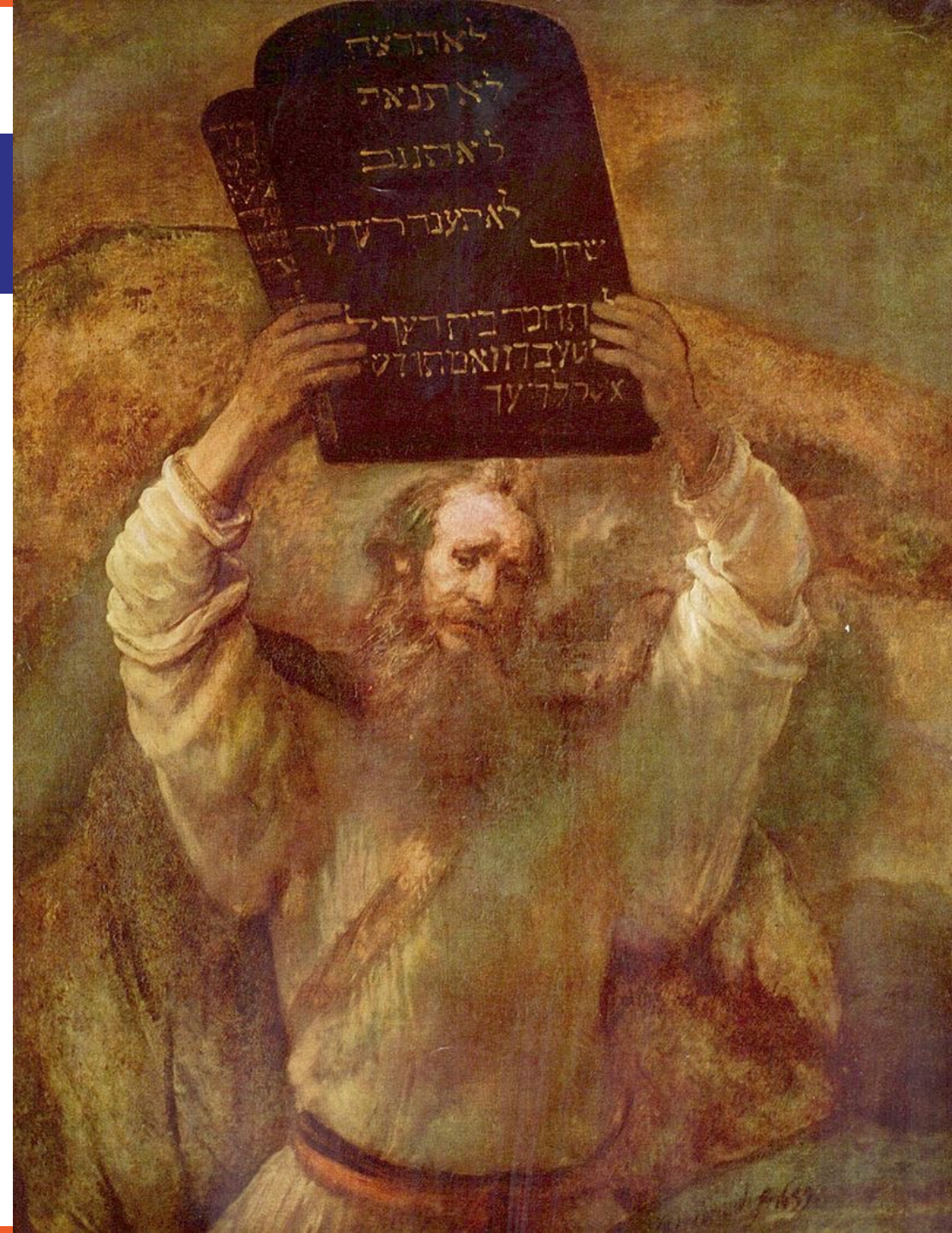
- Chapters 1 and 2: slavery in Egypt and birth of Moses
- 3:1 to 7:7: Moses' call to be leader
- 7:8 to 11: confrontation between Moses and Pharaoh: the plagues
- 12:1 to 15:21: The Exodus: Passover, flight from Egypt, destruction of Pharaoh and his army, celebration
- 15:22 to 18:27: Forming a new community in the wilderness
- 19:1 to 24:18: Giving of the law and the formation of the covenant
- 25:1 to 31:18: Plan for the tabernacle
- 32:1 to 34:35: Golden calf: fall and restoration of Israel
- 35:1 to 40:38: God fills the tabernacle

Key themes

- The (self-) revelation of God
- The liberation of God's people
- The forming of a people before God under the law: making a covenant

- And many other interesting questions!

Moses and Ten Commandments, Rembrandt (1659)



God defines Godself

- “The Lord passed before him [Moses], and proclaimed, ‘The Lord, the Lord, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness, keeping steadfast love for the thousandth generation, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin, yet by no means clearing the guilty, but visiting the iniquity of the parents upon the children and the children’s children, to the third and fourth generations.’” (Exodus 34:6-7)
- Repeated in various forms in Numbers, Nehemiah, Psalms, Jeremiah, Joel, Jonah, and others

Who is God?

- God first reveals God's identity not in Egypt, not in Israel but in Midian—to the far east, Moses is on the mountain of Horeb
- God is linked to what has come before: "I am the God of your Father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob." (3:6)
- God sees suffering: "I have observed the misery of my people who are in Egypt; I have heard their cry on account of their taskmasters." (3:7)
- God is with God's people: "I will be with you" (3:12) when you go down into Egypt and when you come up
- With a funny name: "I am who I am." (3:14)
- "Thus you shall say to the Israelites, "I am has sent me to you."" (3:14)



God's Name: YHWH

- In Hebrew, YHWH is a form of the word “to be”—causative (Hiphil) third person singular imperfect so “causes to be”
 - Reference to God as creator?
- Christians have tried to link “I am” to Greek philosophy and say that God is absolute being—but that’s not really an idea that exists in Hebrew
- YHWH is unpronounceable name of God for Jewish people—but Yahweh (Jehovah) for Christians, LORD for New Revised Standard Version
- Self-revelation related to God’s promises: God is who God is and God will deliver Hebrew people into “a land flowing with milk and honey” (3:17)



Liberation: Let my people go

- Hebrew people are enslaved; God acts; they are free
- “Then you shall say to Pharaoh, ‘Thus says the Lord: Israel is my firstborn son. I said to you, ‘Let my son go that he may worship me.’ But you refused to let him go; now I will kill your firstborn son.’” (4:22-23)
- The scandal of election: what are we to make of the fact that God chooses one people to free?

James Tissot, c. 1896



What are the people being liberated from?

- Chapters 7 to 11 tell story of confrontation between Moses / Aaron and Pharaoh and his religious leaders
- Traditionally told as one story of 10 plagues
- But different source materials are being combined into one narrative
 - In some confrontations, Moses is alone; in others Moses and Aaron are together
 - Different verbs are used to refer to the hardening of Pharaoh's heart
- Not all of them are plagues; some are signs, e.g. turning water into blood
- These various encounters show us how liberation is needed on multiple fronts

What are the people being liberated from?

- Liberation from oppressive rule of Pharaoh is key part of Exodus
- Pharaoh's officials are often translated as "magicians" but more accurate to understand them as religious functionaries who serve Egyptian religion
- Aaron turns water in river into blood, fish die, and "the river stank so that the Egyptians could not drink its water, and there was blood throughout the whole land of Egypt." (7:21)
- Then Pharaoh's "magicians" "did the same by their secret arts" (7:22)
 - Why would they want more blood in the water?
- Hebrew people also need liberation from religious oppression; Moses and especially Aaron demonstrate religious superiority of YHWH



Where does liberation happen?

- “When the Pharaoh let the people go, God did not lead them by the way of the land of the Philistines, although that was nearer; for God thought, ‘If the people face war, they may change their minds and return to Egypt.’ So God led the people by the roundabout way of the wilderness toward the Red Sea.” (13:17-18)
- *Yam sûp*: Red Sea?
 - *Sûp* means “reed”: maybe this is a reedy marsh or lake

Dura-Europos fresco





Where does liberation happen?

- Chapter 15 is song of victory of Moses and is some of oldest Hebrew in Bible
 - “Horse and rider he has thrown into the sea” (15:1)
 - “Pharaoh’s chariots and his army he cast into the sea... The floods covered them; they went down into the depths like a stone.” (15:4-5)
- No mention in this hymn of anyone crossing through sea on dry land—perhaps the sea language is just a metaphor for defeat and distress
 - Frequently in the Bible the sea is a place of distress and God rescues people from sea / distress (e.g. Psalm 69)
- Exodus 14 tells classic story of crossing through on dry land and then God drowning Pharaoh—perhaps this is an evolution and elaboration of the hymn in chapter 15

Theological truths about God's liberating act

- The present situation of apparent hopelessness does not define what is possible for God: change and liberation are always possible
- God's liberation is not just political but also religious
 - Not an accident that the last act in Egypt lays the groundwork for the Passover
 - "I will strike down every firstborn in the land of Egypt, both human beings and animals; on all the gods of Egypt I will execute judgements." (12:12)
- Liberation of God's people also entails the humiliation and utter defeat of the Egyptians
- Book of Exodus doesn't end in chapter 15: you still have to learn how to live as a people liberated by God



Living as a liberated people

- You've crossed over the sea, your oppressor is dead, so you...
- ...find something to eat
- "The whole congregation of the Israelites complained against Moses and Aaron in the wilderness. The Israelites said to them, 'If only we had died by the hand of the Lord in the land of Egypt, when we sat by the fleshpots and ate our fill of bread; for you have brought us out into this wilderness to kill this whole assembly with hunger.'" (Exodus 16:2-3)



Manna in the wilderness

- Israel is building a new society and a new economy and food is central to both—recall centrality of food production to their oppression in Egypt
- “I am going to rain bread from heaven for you, and each day the people shall go out and gather enough for that day. In that way, I will test them, whether they will follow my instructions or not. On the sixth day, when they prepare what they bring in, it will be twice as much as they gather on other days.” (Exodus 16:4-5)
- Bread is a gift from God: it doesn't come from Pharaoh or from hard work but as a gift
- Food is the key point marking the difference between Israel's life in slavery and new life on the far side of the Red Sea

What is it?

- Food is a test of faithfulness to what God commands—meet this test by: 1) taking “enough for that day”; 2) resting on sabbath
- But the people fail
 - Some people keep manna overnight “and it bred worms and became foul.” (16:20)—Moses gets upset
 - On seventh day, “some of the people went out to gather, and they found none.” (16:27)—God gets upset
- A little sympathy here?
 - If you’ve escaped from slavery and are wandering in the wilderness, surely it’s alright to exercise some control over your food supply?
 - God hasn’t even given 10 commandments yet (Exodus 20)—how they can know the sabbath is so important?
- So what’s going on?



Eating is point of demarcation from Egypt

- In Egypt, there was lots of storage of food and hard work to gather that food—Pharaoh takes it for himself and his own profit
- In wilderness, there is no storage of food, the food is a gift, and you can rest for a day
- New relationship with food will lead to different culture, different economy, different relationship with land, and new religious practices
- The stakes are as high as they could be: how food is regarded, collected, and consumed is the key dividing line setting apart God's people from what they are fleeing
- If they can't understand this, then it doesn't matter if Pharaoh is drowned—they haven't really escaped Egypt

Living as a liberated people

- Moses has to learn how to lead his people
 - Jethro: “You should also look for able men among all the people... Let them sit as judges for the people at all times; let them bring every minor case themselves. So it will be easier for you, and they will bear the burden with you.” (18:21-22)
- This leads up to the giving of law, beginning in chapter 20 with the 10 Commandments (“words”)
- Law is a gift from God to a people God has freed—it does not establish a relationship but it confirms one
 - “I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery; you shall have no other gods before me.” (20:2-3)
 - God acts first; the people respond



Women

- The midwives Shiphrah and Puah perform crucial acts of resistance to imperial power and make space for Moses' birth (1:15-22)
- Moses' mother (named Jochebed in 6:20) cares for him after his birth, in spite of the danger, and then cares for him when Pharaoh's daughter takes him in
- Women are strong, crafty, and, when necessary, deceitful to carry forward their people's identity
- Miriam ("the prophet") leads women in song and dance (15:20-21): is this original song that was expanded and placed in Moses' mouth?



Hardened heart

- Repeated references during the plague / sign sequence to the hardening of Pharaoh's heart
 - “Still, Pharaoh's heart was hardened and he would not listen to them, as the Lord had said.” (7:13)
- Who is responsible for this?
 - Pharaoh: “Pharaoh hardened his heart this time also, and would not let the people go.” (8:32)
 - God: “But the Lord hardened Pharaoh's heart, and he would not let the Israelites go.” (10:20)
- Why would God be doing this? What does it mean to have a hardened heart?
- Where do we see hardened hearts today?

Exodus from the other side

- Exodus is an ethno-nationalist story: the history of the formation of a people as a nation
- Easy to focus on the moment of liberation and the giving of the law
- But this liberation also leads to destruction of other people
 - Amalek is a semi-nomadic group of people who are enemies of Israel at various points in Hebrew Scriptures—they attack and are defeated by Joshua with help from Moses' raised hand
 - “Then the Lord said to Moses, ‘Write this as a reminder in a book and recite it in the hearing of Joshua: I will utterly blot out the remembrance of Amalek from under heaven.’” (17:14-15)
 - Is this part of learning to live as a liberated people?
- Liberation leads to settling of Promised Land which leads to genocidal violence of Book of Joshua



Exodus and its after-life

- “Was it not you who dried up the sea, the waters of the great deep; who made the depths of the sea a way for the redeemed to cross over? So the ransomed of the Lord shall return, and come to Zion with singing.” (Isaiah 51:10-11)
- Jesus and the gospel writers link the Last Supper with the Exodus and the Passover
 - “This is my blood of the covenant” (Mark 14:24)
- After giving of 10 commandments and other laws, formation of covenant, Moses says: “Behold the blood of the covenant.” (Exod. 24:8)



Exodus and Protestants

- “Our Moses, and most godly wise governor and King hath delivered us out of the captivity and bondage of Pharaoh. I mean by this Moses, King Henry the eighth, my most sovereign, favourable lord and husband... And I mean by this Pharaoh the Bishop of Rome, who hath been and is a greater persecutor of all Christians than ever was Pharaoh of the children of Israel.” (Katherine Parr, *Lamentations of a Sinner*, 1547)

Pilgrims and Puritans

- Puritans saw themselves as Israelites, Egyptians were Papists and/or English rulers, Canaanites were Native Americans; England was Egypt and New England was Canaan
- William Bradford on *Mayflower* compared Pilgrims to “Moses and Israelites when they went out of Egypt.”
- John Winthrop: his journey was similar to how God “carried the Israelites into the wilderness and made them forget the fleshpots of Egypt.”
- John Cotton: “we have been further given certainly to know, that within these late years, there hath, by God’s visitation, reigned a wonderful plague... in a manner to the utter destruction, devastation, and depopulation of that whole territory.”



Exodus and its after-life

- Story of Exodus has inspired movements for freedom and liberation in human history
 - When Israel was in Egypt's land / Let my people go / Oppress'd so hard they could not stand / Let my people go
 - Go down, Moses / Way down in Egypt's land / Tell old Pharaoh / Let my people go
- Liberation theologians see Exodus as paradigm of liberation
 - Exodus is “the breaking away from a situation of despoliation and misery and the beginning of the construction of a just and comradely society. It is the suppression of disorder and the creation of a new order.” (Gustavo Gutiérrez, *A Theology of Liberation*, 1971)



Exodus from the other side

- Robert Allen Warrior, “Canaanites, cowboys, and Indians” (1989)
- “The obvious characters in the story for Native Americans to identify with are the Canaanites, the people who already lived in the promised land.... It is the Canaanite story that has been overlooked by those seeking to articulate theologies of liberation. Especially ignored are those parts of the story that describe Yahweh’s command to mercilessly annihilate the indigenous population.”
- “The covenant, in other words, has two parts: deliverance and conquest.”



Reading Exodus now

- Exodus is meant to communicate theological truths about God to a people living in a time of change and confusion
- God acts towards liberation—the present situation of hopelessness does not define the limits of God's power
- But we need to wrestle with how this liberation is understood to have unfolded and if it is limited to a particular people
- God not only liberates but provides form and structure for living as a liberated people—the law is a gift
- God's action in the world happens through a surprising and unexpected constellation of people—we should not expect anything different today



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