

## Unit 1 Introduction

# Overview of the Book of Exodus

The book of Exodus contains some of the most dramatic stories in Scripture. God delivers Moses and the Israelite slaves in Egypt from the oppression of a pharaoh and his empire through a series of supernatural plagues and a miraculous parting of the sea. Israel's "exodus" from Egyptian bondage reveals who God is and how God acts in the world. Throughout the Old Testament, the exodus is the paradigm of God's saving power (e.g., Leviticus 26:24-25; Deuteronomy 6:21-22; Psalms 105; 136; Isaiah 11:16; Jeremiah 16:14-15; 32:20-21; Micah 6:4). It provides the motive for worshipping the Lord (e.g., Exodus 20:2; Deuteronomy 6:12) and following the Law's commands (e.g., Leviticus 11:45; 22:32-33; Deuteronomy 5:15), especially to provide care and justice for the oppressed (e.g., Exodus 23:9; Leviticus 19:35; Deuteronomy 16:12).

God's liberation of an oppressed people has also been an important message of good news to many communities around the world that have historically endured marginalization, social injustice, and discrimination. During the civil rights movement in the United States, Martin Luther King Jr. used the exodus story as a model for the struggle to end racial segregation, noting how the Israelites, too, suffered trials in their quest for freedom yet ultimately received God's victory.

The importance of God's deliverance of the Israelites out of Egyptian bondage is clear. But that story comprises only the first 15 chapters of the book of Exodus, which is 40 chapters long! The rest of the book, while often less dramatic and harder to understand, is also vital for the overall story of God and God's people in the Old Testament. Much of what remains are laws to govern Israel's religious beliefs and rituals, social practices, and civil life. There is also a detailed account of the building of the Lord's sanctuary (tabernacle) in the wilderness. Yet all of these things center around the people's experiences with God at Mount Sinai. The Israelites' liberation from Egypt is only the first part of a larger narrative that begins with God delivering the people and moves to God leading them through the wilderness to Mount Sinai and giving them the Law (Torah) for their life as God's chosen people. The book of Exodus is about the transformation of an enslaved people into a new community that can live faithfully in God's presence and serve God's redemptive purposes in the world.

### *The Book of Exodus as a Whole*

The book of Exodus has two main parts: 1) God and Israel in Egypt (1:1—15:21), and 2) God and Israel in the wilderness (15:22—40:38). Put another way, the book describes two events:

1) the deliverance of the Israelites from Egyptian bondage and into the wilderness (chaps. 1—18) and 2) the Lord's covenant-making revelation to Israel at Mount Sinai, including the laws, rituals, and instructions given there (chaps. 19—40). Within these parts, there are smaller sections, and the book contains different types (genres) of material. There are stories, but also poems and songs (chap. 15), laws (especially in chaps. 20—23), instructions for rituals, offerings, sacrifices, and other priestly duties (e.g., Passover in chaps. 11—12; see also chaps. 24—25; 34), and building plans and reports for the wilderness sanctuary (chaps. 25—31; 33—40). The book shows who Israel's God is and what it means to be God's people in the world.

A key aspect of this book is its place within the larger story of the Old Testament.\* The background to the exodus is the divine promise of land and descendants given to Abraham, Sarah, and their family in Genesis 12:1-3. The opening of the book affirms that these promises are being fulfilled by stating that Jacob's descendants, who went down to Egypt at the end of Genesis about 70 in number, have now grown to fill that land (1:1-7). However, God's fulfillment of this promise is also the problem that sets the story in motion, as a new Egyptian pharaoh sees these Hebrews as a threat (1:8-10). Up to this point in the Old Testament, God has undertaken a mission to restore creation back to the right-relationships with which it began (see Genesis 1—2) by becoming a covenant partner with all living beings (see Genesis 9:7-17), and specifically by calling Abraham and Sarah's descendants (see Genesis 12:1-3) to be in a promise-filled relationship with the Lord as an instrument of blessing to all people. Now the very people whom God has called find themselves trapped in bondage in Egypt. Through the exodus deliverance, God frees this group and creates them as a distinctive people—a national community—devoted to the Lord and the calling they've received. The rest of the book's telling of the wilderness journey, the giving of laws, and the building of the tabernacle describes the beginning of God's work to form this newly created people into a community with a special character and role as part of the divine mission to restore creation.

### *The Parts of Exodus*

Chapters 1—2 describe the Egyptian's fear-driven oppression, the Israelites' suffering, the birth and rescue of Moses, and his trouble in Egypt that leads him to flee to the desert land of Midian. Notable here is the courageous but often-overlooked role of the Hebrew midwives, Shiphrah and Puah (1:15-22), whose faith led them to commit acts of civil disobedience against the pharaoh that

allowed Moses to be born. The final episode in 2:23-25 presents the catalyst for what is to come, as God hears the Israelites' cries and is moved to act.

In chapter 3, God calls Moses to return to Egypt and rescue the Israelites. The divine words to Moses at the burning bush provide the theological perspective for all that follows. The Lord sees, hears, and knows the pain of the suffering and responds with action (3:7-9). However, this covenant God acts not unilaterally, but through the work of human partners. Hence, God sends Moses to Egypt as the instrument of divine liberation (3:10-12). Chapters 3—12 then tell of the events in Egypt, from God's equipping of Moses (with the giving of God's special name in 3:13-15) to a series of plagues that represent a contest between the God of Israel and the gods of Egypt (including the pharaoh, 7:8—12:32). Chapters 12—15 describe the parting of the waters, the destruction of the Egyptian army, and the beginning of Israel's journey into the wilderness toward the promised land. Here God creates Israel as a new national community. But it is not just the Hebrews that God set free. A "mixed crowd" also went out with them, and God brought them all together into this newly created people (12:38). Notable here are the poetic songs by Moses (15:1-19) and Miriam (15:20-21) that celebrate God as liberator.

Chapters 15—18 recount Israel's wilderness journey on the way to Mount Sinai. Here begins their formational period in which they will learn more clearly who God is and who they are called to be as God's people. The early stages are marked by the people's struggles with fear for their survival, even as God provides and protects. In chapter 19, they arrive at Mount Sinai, where they will remain for the rest of Exodus (and beyond). The Lord formalizes the covenant and reveals the Torah meant to shape Israel's understanding of who they are and how they should live as the covenant community for the sake of the world (a "priestly kingdom," 19:6, NRSV). The Ten Commandments (20:1-17) begin the section by emphasizing that Israel's obedient law-keeping is a response to God's gracious deliverance (20:1-2). More instructions follow (the "Book of the Covenant" in 20:22-23:19), with some laws that trouble contemporary readers (see 21:23-25 or 22:16-17), but also with a thoroughgoing emphasis that the Lord sides with the oppressed and requires the covenant people to do the same (see 22:21-24).

As part of the Sinai revelation, chapters 25—31 provide detailed instructions for building the Lord's wilderness tabernacle (meaning "dwelling"). The process is interrupted by a sinful rebellion in chapters 32—34 when the people, in Moses' absence, yield to fear for survival and a desire for a tangible representation of God and build a golden calf. Despite the horrific violence that follows, God renews the divine commitment to the Israelites with perhaps the most important revelation of God's character in Scripture: "merciful

and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness...forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin" (34:6-7). In chapters 35—40, the Israelites meticulously follow the divine instructions and build the sanctuary. This portable worship structure symbolizes the divine presence in their midst and will provide a meeting place with God throughout the wilderness journey.

### *Theological Themes*

In and through the stories, poems, laws, and rituals in Exodus, several themes emerge about God's character and what God commands of the covenant people as part of the divine redemptive mission. First, God fully comprehends the pain of those who suffer and is moved by their cries (see 2:23-25; 3:7-12). God doesn't remain aloof or unaffected but sees, hears, knows, and, in response, acts. Yet, God accomplishes the divine saving acts in the world not by manipulating or by going it alone, but through the faithful actions of covenant partners who themselves face off against oppressive forces and work for transformation. And the God of the exodus pays special attention to the oppressed and mistreated—those who have been minoritized, underserved, and disadvantaged by unfair systems and structures. The exodus story proclaims that God works in the world on behalf of the suffering and oppressed to set them free in tangible ways—political, social, economic, and more. The Old Testament repeatedly references this revelation of God's character and declares that God's people should exemplify that character in their own practices, policies, and systems.

The exodus story also shows the relationship between grace and obedience. The book first tells what God has done for Israel (chaps. 1—18) and only then turns to what Israel must do (chaps. 19—40). The laws enter the story only after the grace-filled deliverance. The Lord first acts to rescue the people, and then they are asked to take up the question, "Now then, how should we live?" This means two things. First, any kind of faithfulness is possible only because God has first acted in grace. Second, the divine laws given to Israel did not serve as a means for them to establish their relationship with God (or earn redemption). Rather, obedience in daily life, whether faithful worship or ethics or other ways of keeping Torah, was a response to the grace that God had given (see 19:1-6). The message of Exodus is that if God's people will respond to grace with obedience, they can carry God's presence and blessing to others and be instruments of the divine redemptive mission underway in the world.

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\*The remaining discussion draws on the author's book, *Telling the Old Testament Story: God's Mission and God's People* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2017).

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