

# The Exodus

## A commentary on Exodus 1–15

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*THE STORY of the Exodus is one of the most exciting the world has ever known. It has all the elements of a good story: exciting plot, dramatic confrontations between good and evil, vivid characterisation, spectacular and miraculous events, subtle use of humour and dramatic irony—and a terrific (and terrifying) conclusion.*

*But the Exodus is more than just a story. It is an account of God's revelation of Himself in human history. It is a record of one of the most miraculous deliverances God has yet brought about for His people. It is also a parable, which speaks of the epic work of salvation that God has achieved in the deliverance of human beings from the power of sin and death.*

*For all these reasons the account of the Exodus in Exodus 1–15 is of tremendous interest and importance today. This series of articles takes the form of a commentary, and is an endeavour to rediscover this important episode of Israel's history, this foundation of our faith. The aim is to develop the themes and lessons of the Exodus narrative, as well as to deal with some of the more difficult and puzzling features of the text itself.*

*This introductory article does not adopt the commentary format of succeeding studies. Instead it lays the groundwork for the commentary proper, which will commence next month.*

### A. The book of Exodus as a whole

**B**EFORE 'diving in', as it were, to an in-depth consideration of Exodus 1:1 and beyond, it is worth taking a brief look around and posing a few questions. What are the basic themes of the book of Exodus as a whole? Where does it begin and end, and what happens in between? Before those questions, there is a prior one. What has happened in the unfolding of God's plan by the time the end of the book of Genesis has been reached? Where have we got to in the account of God's dealings with mankind when the book of Exodus begins?

#### The story so far . . .

We discover that in the course of the book of Genesis God has chosen Himself a family. This choice began with His special commission to Abraham recorded in Genesis 12. Abraham's family has by and large been faithful to God, and God has made them spectacular promises. At least three core elements can be discerned in those promises:

**1** *The promise of a seed.* Abraham and his children would become a great and mighty nation; other nations would in turn be blessed because of this. (I leave aside here the vital Messianic dimension to this promise, which was not to be fulfilled until the New Testament era.)

**2** *The promise of a land.* God promised to give Abraham the land of Israel upon which he walked. This land would one day become the permanent possession of Abraham and his descendants.

**3** *The promise to be with Abraham and his family.* God promised to bless and protect the seed of Abraham; He became identified with them as their God, making it clear that they would have a special relationship with Him.

The book of Genesis has taken us through these promises and showed them handed down from Abraham to Isaac to Jacob; it has told us about the lives of these men, and also of the life of Joseph, Jacob's son. But it is worth asking which of these promises has actually been fulfilled by the time the end of Genesis has been reached and the story of the Exodus is about to begin.

The answer is quite surprising, and serves to emphasise the extent of the patriarchs' faith. By the end of Genesis, Promise 1 has scarcely been fulfilled (the seventy people that made up 'the Hebrews' as they went down to Egypt to be with Joseph could hardly be called a great and mighty nation). The patriarchs do have children, as God promised (though not without considerable difficulty and repeated testing of their faith), but

Genesis closes with them still a long way from nationhood.

Promise 2 lay yet more fallow. The fathers had *not* inherited the land (with the exception of the purchases mentioned in Genesis 23 and 33:19 [cf. Josh. 24:32] and used as burying places—again, hardly an auspicious fulfilment). Furthermore, Genesis ends with the fathers going in completely the *opposite* direction to the land which they hoped to inherit—into Egypt because of famine.

That leaves us with Promise 3. As far as this promise is concerned, it was no doubt true that God had showed Himself to be with the fathers in numerous episodes of their lives; and yet the very lack of fulfilment of the first two promises, coupled with the extensive trials they endured, would have at least raised the question at less faithful moments in the lives of the Hebrews just whether God really was with them or not.

In the light of these points, the faith of Jacob and Joseph at the end of Genesis is quite remarkable.

So Genesis ends with the Israelites going down to dwell in the land of Egypt. It is an ominous ending, for the final word of Genesis, in English as in Hebrew, is the word 'Egypt'—the very antithesis of the Promised Land. But God has subjected the family of Abraham to this fate in hope, for a contrasting note of optimism is struck by the faithful prophecy of Joseph right at the end of the book. Joseph assures his brethren that they will be brought up out of Egypt, making his brethren swear that his bones will be taken with them to the Promised Land.

So it is in Egypt, approximately 400 years later, that the book of Exodus will take up the story. In the interval between Genesis and Exodus, and in Exodus 1, we shall witness the potential for the fulfilment of Promise 1, for the Hebrews have now become many. While the Israelites will not have seen the fulfilment of Promise 2 even by the end of Deuteronomy, Exodus will record the start of the journey from Egypt to Canaan, which will culminate in its fulfilment in the book of Joshua.

Exodus will describe the fulfilment of the *first* of the three great promises (a nation is about to be born), will make possible the *second*, and will provide unassailable evidence that the *third* of the great promises had been true all along. Exodus shows that God keeps His promises and is always moving forward in His great purpose for His people.

### The book of Exodus

The first half of Exodus is taken up with describing the miraculous deliverance from Egypt that God achieves on behalf of His people. It concludes with the marvellous victory song of Moses and Aaron recorded in chapter 15, which, God willing, is as far as we shall travel in this series. But it is worth sketching what will happen in the rest of the book, for doing so enables us better to understand the place of Exodus in the Biblical writings as a whole, and the way in which the deliverance from Egypt fits into the larger framework of the book in which it is recorded. The table below may be helpful.

A brief outline of the book of Exodus	
1–15a	The Exodus
15b–18	Wilderness wanderings and faithlessness
19–24	God's covenant with Israel on Mount Sinai
25–31	Instructions for the tabernacle
32–34	Rebellion over the golden calf
35–40	The making of the tabernacle
40:34-38	The glory of the Lord fills the tabernacle

Various interesting points emerge from the basic structure shown in the table. First of all, there is the flow of the story as a whole. Exodus begins with the *birth* of the nation of Israel as a people. In Egypt they are slaves; true, they have grown from seventy persons to a mighty number, but their status is still that of *slaves*, they are not an independent nation. God is about to grant them nationhood by bringing them out of bondage and by redeeming them to Himself. This is of the utmost significance, for it is the beginning of the rest of Israel's history. This is their origin as a nation.

No sooner have they been redeemed and saved by God, however, than a question mark is raised over whether or not they are *worthy* to have that status conferred upon them—in their repeated murmuring and complaining in the wilderness (chs. 16–18). Indeed, we quickly learn that they are *not* worthy, just as none of *us* is worthy of the salvation of God. Nevertheless, despite their faith-

lessness, God is still willing to provide for them and to make His covenant with them, which He does on Mount Sinai (chs. 19–24).

This is another pivotal event in Israel's history. The Israelites have been brought into existence as a nation by God's bringing them out of Egypt; now they have a constitution, a contract with God, a statement of rules and regulations according to which His relationship with them as His people is to be worked out. They enter into covenant relationship with Him, and the obligations of both parties are made clear.

That God is indeed with and among His people is not something which is merely *asserted* as being true and then codified in a covenant; it is to be demonstrated practically by God's 'dwelling' with His people in the physical presence of the *tabernacle* which was to be in their midst. This is what the second half of Exodus is all about. The tabernacle is the place in which God will dwell among His people. It is significant that the tabernacle is described only *after* the covenant has been made in chapters 19–24. God cannot dwell with men when there is no covenant with them. Nor can He dwell with them unless they have been redeemed to Him, which is just what happens in the Exodus from Egypt. There is thus a logical progression in these main episodes of the book of Exodus: first redemption, then the contract between the parties, or the constitution, then the active presence of God in the midst of the Israelites in the tabernacle.

There is something else worth noticing about this latter part of Exodus concerning the tabernacle (chs. 25–40). Most readers of Exodus will have questioned why the details of the tabernacle must be read twice, once in chapters 25–31, and again in 35–40 (in more or less the same form, although there are some important differences which must not be overlooked). The first set of chapters records the instructions for the tabernacle, and the second the implementation of those instructions. One purpose of the repetition is thus to emphasise that the instructions were complied with in a precise manner.

Perhaps equally important is that sandwiched between the two blocks comes the episode of the golden calf. The tabernacle epitomises God's holiness, on the one hand, and yet also His simultaneous willingness to dwell amongst His people, on the other. Yet in the middle of this almost symmetrical account we find the most gross episode of faithlessness on Israel's part. This brings several facts into clearer focus: first,

the fickle, unworthy and base character of human nature (what a shock to think that man should be doing such things at the very moment that God is showing both His magnanimity and His great holiness!); second, the remarkable work of intercession which Moses performed; third, and perhaps most strikingly of all, the fact that the tabernacle was still built and that God was still prepared to dwell among His people, *even after such an incident as this*. God's love is certainly on a different level from our own.

The ending of Exodus, which follows the long accounts of the making of the tabernacle, recounts how the glory of the Lord filled the tabernacle. The book began in Egypt, and shortly afterwards (in chapter 3) God appeared to one man, to Moses, in the burning bush. But now, right at the end of the book, God appears again—this time to the whole people. It is a moment of exquisite beauty, in which God seals His commitment to dwell among them, to be their God, and to journey with them towards the Promised Land. Exodus has shown us that God keeps His promises; Abraham now *is* a great and mighty nation, one who has received God's laws and has made a covenant with Him upon the holy mountain. God is in her midst and will be with her as she journeys towards her rest.

### The Exodus itself

Surveying the book of Exodus as a whole helps us to see the significance of what is achieved in the first fifteen chapters, the account of the Exodus from Egypt. Those chapters record a *birth*, a new beginning for the Israelites, as a result of a *creative* and *saving* act of God. They were being called, not only from one physical location to another, out of Egypt and towards Canaan, but from one status to another, from one mindset to another, from one way of life to a new life in Him.

There is evidence from later Old Testament books that during the 430 years in Egypt<sup>1</sup> Israel had become idolatrous, and that many had either forsaken the one true God or had lost their sense of His distinctiveness. The sons of Jacob were being called from such ignorance and idolatry to a new level of purity and holiness, in which

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1. Based on Exodus 12:41, though some take this period as commencing in Abraham's time. The matter will be considered when we come to deal with chapter 12.

they would be called upon to worship the one true God and Him alone, and to dedicate themselves wholly to Him. It is because of this, as well as because of the sheer wonder of the miracles that God performed and the horror of the Egyptians' demise, that the Exodus is in many

ways *the* foundational event in Israel's history, an event which is referred to time and again in the later books of the Bible. The Exodus is a picture of deliverance from the power of sin and death to the high calling of membership of God's chosen people.

(To be continued)



## Principles, Preaching and Problems

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# The devil called humanism

## 2. The respective aims of Christianity and humanism

Geoff Walker

### The Christian aim

**T**HE CHRISTIAN has one all-consuming aim. His appreciation of God's power and wisdom means that he must work for God to be honoured throughout the earth. The fulfilment of the Christian's dream will be the earth full of the glory of the Lord (Num. 14:21), its inhabitants submitting to His will, the Creator's earth ruled in the way which He knows is for the good of all its people. No more sorrow and crying, no more death, is the ultimate realisation.

Such a state of affairs, as the Christian sees it, can never be achieved by men's unaided efforts; only in the Kingdom of God, established by God's power, can it be realised. It must involve a dramatic change in the thinking and activities of the peoples of the earth. They must be ready to do God's will. The Bible promises that such a change will indeed take place: "many nations shall come, and say, Come, and let us go up to the mountain of the LORD, and to the house of the God of Jacob; and He will teach us of His ways, and we will walk in His paths: for the law shall go forth of Zion, and the word of the LORD from Jerusalem" (Mic. 4:2).

Here is presented a very down-to-earth scenario; in it there is nothing that the humanist could object to as mysterious or having superstitious overtones. Only on the score that it is to be

God's work and not man's might the humanist demur.

The Christian believes that, if God's will is to be enforced in the world, then the earth itself must of necessity be a beautiful and bountiful place. And he expects to play a part in this work of God. Yet it has to be asked how such a situation can come to pass when, over centuries of time, man has been unable to effect such a change. And the Christian does not see magic and mystery involved. So how can he help this process forward?

### Jesus Christ in God's plan

The answer lies in the work of the Lord Jesus Christ. God necessarily has to work in an imperfect world. His aim is to restore that imperfect world to its original perfection. To this end He sent His Son into that world. This Son proved himself to be a true Son of his righteous Father, morally righteous. He trusted his Father completely, and was ready and able to accept his Father's plans to put the world and its inhabitants right, and to cooperate totally. He was the very opposite of a humanist. He said: "I came . . . not to do mine own will, but the will of Him That sent me" (Jno. 6:38).

For this reason, God, his Father, after acknowledging him as a worthy Son, promised him "the uttermost parts of the earth for [his] possession"