

AN INTRODUCTION TO THE BOOK OF EXODUS

PURPOSE, AUTHENTICITY, AND CONTEXT

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PRELUDE

The Book of Exodus—and the Pentateuch as a whole—is best understood as history told for the sake of theology. Its narrative does not function as a modern chronicle but as a carefully shaped witness to the relationship between the LORD and Israel. The text we now possess reflects a tapestry of traditions, voices, and memories woven together across generations. These sources—legal, liturgical, narrative, and poetic—speak in harmony to reveal how God acted for the people and how the people learned to respond in faith. While the work of textual criticism illuminates the transmission and development of these traditions, a theological reading attends to the final, canonical form, where the book’s patterns, structures, and rhythms cohere into a unified proclamation.

At its core, Exodus is written to form Israel. Its theological purpose is to inspire obedience, trust, and hope in the God who keeps covenant promises. The narrative of deliverance, wilderness testing, and covenant-making is not merely a record of past events but a living voice addressed to later generations. Israel is invited to remember the LORD’s mighty acts—liberation from Egypt, guidance through the wilderness, revelation at Sinai—and to interpret their own lives within that same covenantal framework. The book teaches that God’s past faithfulness grounds present confidence and future expectation.

Thus, Exodus is both memory and proclamation. It reflects historical events and simultaneously shapes those events into a story meant for a particular audience: a people learning to trust the God who saves, commands, forgives, and sustains. In this way, the Exodus narrative becomes a theological lens through which believers in every age recall God’s promises and anticipate their fulfillment.

THE CENTRAL PURPOSE

The Book of Exodus presents the LORD not simply as a character within the story but as its central actor, the one whose initiative, presence, and purpose drive the entire narrative. Moses may stand in the foreground, yet he is always the servant of a drama whose true protagonist is God. Exodus unfolds the divine intention to redeem Israel and to place God's abiding presence at the heart of Israel's communal life. This theme shapes the book from beginning to end: God revealed in the burning bush, God revealed on Sinai, and God dwelling among the people in the Tabernacle.

It is this same presence that was made known in the early chapters of Genesis, where the first dwellers in Eden enjoyed God's presence "walking about" among them. But Adam and Eve were expelled from the garden and thus from God's presence - the revealed God becoming concealed. Yet Genesis does not linger over humanity's errors. Instead, the second part of the book of Genesis presents the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob who announces a plan of salvation and a blessing for the whole world through covenant promise. Still, by the end of Genesis, Jacob and his sons are living in a foreign land, the God who began the covenant relationship again concealed as Israel waits in expectation for the fulfillment of promise and blessing.

Exodus begins precisely at this point of concealment and expectation – The God of Israel concealed but apparently ready to begin the work of redemption. The God of the patriarchs now acts openly, redeeming Israel from bondage and revealing the divine name, character, and power. The Old Testament repeatedly celebrates Exodus as the paradigmatic act of redemption, the event by which Israel learns who God is. God's redeeming work in the deliverance of Israel from slavery and bondage in Egypt will become central to the biblical witness. Indeed, it is within the events of Exodus that God's presence is revealed to and among the people, reaching a climax as the divine glory fills the tabernacle.

The book of Exodus will help to fill the ancient tradition as a narrative governing the theme of God's presence and God's redeeming work in both the Old and the New Testaments. While the book of Exodus takes place within a particular historical context, its narrative is a dynamic, living voice and its events are an ever-present remembrance. These living memories would form and re-form the community of faith in each generation. The events become living memory.

In the Old Testament, there is an ongoing reflection on what God has done and will do. The reflections of God's actions during the time of exodus are, at first, remembered in order to invite Israel to fidelity. But, more than just an invitation to fidelity, the exodus narratives are recalled as reminders of God's promise for Israel. Isaiah, for instance, envisages the warrior God of Moses again acting with strength as an end to the Babylonian Captivity in the 6th century BCE. But not only does the biblical narrative explore the depths of the exodus, the liturgical

tradition does so as well. The three great festivals of Israel (Passover, Pentecost, and Tabernacles) each have their roots in an event from the exodus (the flight from Egypt, the gift of the law at Sinai, and the wandering in the wilderness). These memorial feasts recall the power and authority, redemption and salvation of the LORD that stemmed from the past, was remembered in the present, and would be revealed in the future. The past was taken as a way to shape the present in the life of God's people and was used to reimagine possibilities for the future.

In the New Testament Jesus Messiah will inaugurate a new exodus, God present in the flesh and then in the Spirit to redeem all of creation. In the end, God's deliverance of Israel from Egypt and the establishment of the law at Sinai are significant motifs in the Old Testament, pointing to the great mystery of God dwelling with God's people on earth, the divine presence as blessing, protection, and salvation.

TEXTUAL & HISTORICAL AUTHENTICITY

Textual Witness

The narrative of Exodus, in its final canonical form, is a composite work, shaped over centuries by a plurality of writers, editors, and redactors. These voices emerged from different periods of Israel's history and from distinct cultural settings within Israel and Judah. As a result, the book reflects varied customs, theological emphases, and storytelling traditions. Modern scholarship debates the identification of specific sources, the boundaries of major literary blocks, and the precise stages of development. Yet the broad consensus remains: Exodus is not the product of a single author but a tapestry of Israel's oldest traditions, woven together into a coherent theological whole.

Within this tapestry, the Priestly tradition plays a decisive role. Priestly writers and editors shaped the final structure, giving the book its liturgical rhythms, its concern for holiness, and its emphasis on God's abiding presence. Their work does not erase earlier voices—such as narrative traditions associated with the Yahwist or Elohist—but gathers them into a unified proclamation of God's redeeming action. The result is a narrative that preserves ancient memories while presenting them through a theological lens suited to Israel's worshiping life.

This composite nature is not a weakness but a strength. It allows Exodus to speak with multiple registers—historical, liturgical, narrative, and theological—while maintaining a single, compelling message: the God who revealed himself to the patriarchs now acts in power to redeem Israel and dwell among them.

Archaeological & Historical Witness

From the outset, it must be acknowledged that chronological and geographical tensions arise when Exodus is read through the lens of modern historiography. Yet applying modern historical expectations to an ancient theological narrative is fundamentally unfair to the aims of its authors and editors. They were not attempting to produce a modern historical record; they were offering a theological interpretation of remembered events, shaped for proclamation, identity formation, and covenantal instruction. Even so, the theological nature of Scripture does not imply the absence of historical grounding. It is reasonable to conclude that the Exodus tradition reflects real historical experiences, remembered and retold through literary artistry and theological purpose.

From an archaeological point of view, evidence for the exodus and subsequent conquest is scant and far from decisive. Indeed, external evidence for the conquest – the stories behind the narratives of the books of Joshua and Judges – are problematic and often contradictory to the biblical witness. Decisive evidence for Israel’s mass departure from Egypt is simply non-existent and lacking. Yet the absence of evidence neither proves nor disproves the events in question. Archaeology rarely yields definitive proof for population movements in the Late Bronze Age, and the biblical traditions may preserve circumstantial and suggestive memories of such movements.

In very broad strokes, the archaeological witness indicates that there was an Israelite or kinship settlement in the region from at least the middle of the Bronze Age (3300–1200 BCE), with clear cultural continuity through Iron Age I (1200–1000 BCE). This establishes Israel’s presence but not the mechanism of its arrival. The central historical question remains: How did Israel come to occupy and eventually dominate Canaan?

Current scholarship generally considers four main theories:¹

- **Rapid Conquest** — After the exodus from Egypt, the conquest occurred in a speedy, dramatic fashion, following the historical outline of the biblical text. This theory is the most problematic based on the current archaeological data found in Syria-Palestine.
- **Gradual Infiltration** — The exodus from Egypt was a longer process than the biblical witness would suggest. The “conquest” was, then, actually a gradual infiltration or migration of semi-nomadic people (the Israelites) as they left Egypt or other lands. This new group would

¹ An artifact known as the Merneptah Stele also points to the presence of a people-group called Israel in Syria-Palestine by the late 13th century. The Merneptah Stele, a stone slab that commemorates the military conquests of Merneptah, Egyptian pharaoh from 1213-1203 BCE and successor to Rameses II, is significant to biblical studies because it the earliest reference to a people called “Israel” outside of the Hebrew bible.

have initially lived peacefully with their Canaanite neighbors, but would have later formed a confederation of tribes and gradually seized power, either through an engaged war, cultural dominance, or a peasant revolt.

- Indigenous Emergence — Israel arose from within Canaanite society. Political unrest, likely caused by the withdrawal of Egypt from Canaan in the Late Bronze Age (hence the Egypt narrative) helped the loosely affiliated tribes of Israel rise to prominence as other tribes collapsed. The Exodus narrative and subsequent conquest narratives, are the result of telescoping memory and theological manipulation.² DNA evidence suggests, but is not yet conclusive, that the Israelites and the Canaanites share ancient kinship.
- Small-group Exodus — Coincidental to political unrest and the rise of an Israelite confederation in Canaan, there was an exodus from Egypt, an escape or migration by a Semitic people who then settled in Canaan. The Semitic group, often identified with the tribe of Levi, escaped Egypt and joined with the already established Israelite confederation.³

These last three proposals are not mutually exclusive. Together they offer a historically responsible framework for understanding how a remembered act of divine redemption became the foundational story of Israel's identity and faith.

Narrative Chronology

When the events of Exodus occurred is a difficult question, largely because the narrative provides no firm chronological anchor—no datable ruler, battle, or inscription that yields a definitive historical point of reference. Even so, many scholars consider it plausible that the “new king” referenced in Exodus 1:8 refers to Ramesses II (1279 to 1213 BCE). During his reign, Egypt was embroiled in a devastating, prolonged conflict with the Hittites, most of which was fought in Syria-Palestine, causing tremendous political and cultural instability in the region. Ramesses II was also renowned for his large-scale building projects - one of which was most certainly Pi-Ramesses (the current archaeological site known as Tell el-Dab'a) mentioned in Exodus 1:11. Originally a fifteenth century city probably built by the Hyksos (an Asiatic people who ruled over Egypt in the 17th and 16th centuries), Pi-Ramesses was rebuilt by Ramesses II as his royal capital and military outpost guarding Egypt's northern frontier.

² See, Israel Finkelstein & Neil Silberman, *The Bible Unearthed*.

³ See Richard Elliot Friedman, *The Exodus: How it happened and why it matters*. This theory has garnered some recent interest because it takes seriously the corporate memory and story of the Jewish people by not disregarding the exodus as non-historical. Moreover, it pays attention to the archaeological evidence and takes into account the not insubstantial literary peculiarities of the biblical witness - including, the use of Egyptian names for Levites only and the prominence of Levites in the exodus narrative; the peculiar absence of Levi from the Song of Deborah (Judges 5) and the equally peculiar absence of Israel from the Song of the Sea (Exodus 15).

Descriptions of life in Egypt in Exodus 1-15 broadly fit the historical reality of the New Kingdom (ca. 1570-1140 BCE). The kind of chattel slavery described in Exodus 2 was practiced during this period; brickmaking with straw and clay is well attested; and the narrative's references to magicians, plagues, and Nile-based life reflect recognizable Egyptian realities. None of this provides a definitive date or proves Israel's presence in Egypt, but the literary presentation aligns with a 13th-century BCE setting.

A challenge for the dating lies in the tension with the biblical chronology in 1 Kings 6, which places the Exodus around 1446 BCE:

In the four hundred and eightieth year after the Israelites came out of the land of Egypt, in the fourth year of Solomon's reign over Israel, in the month of Ziv, which is the second month, he began to build the house of the Lord. (1 Kings 6:1)

According to this chronology, the Exodus would have occurred circa 1446 BCE. This date depends on Solomon's accession (commonly 970 or 966 BCE) and the temple's construction in his fourth year. This date, however, conflicts with the archaeological evidence from Canaan and does not fit within the historical framework of ancient Egypt.⁴ Most scholars therefore understand the 1 Kings chronology as theological, likely crafted to emphasize the symbolic centrality of the temple.

In the end, careful readers must approach Exodus as historical memory expressed through a theological lens—a narrative less concerned with precise dates and more concerned with revealing God's identity, God's saving action, and the implications of that revelation for Israel's life. These are sacred histories, sacramental in character: visible stories that disclose the hidden mystery of God's redeeming presence.

EXODUS WITHIN OLD TESTAMENT THEOLOGY

The place and importance of the book of Exodus within the framework of the Old Testament provides a key to understanding its theology. In the Old Testament, Israel consistently reflects on its history through a theological lens, and the Old Testament becomes a living chorus of voices—varied traditions fused into a single symphony. The voices give witness to Israel's history, identity, and faith by recalling both Israel's earliest stages of formation *and* by giving theological perspective to that formation in time and place. On one hand, the canon presents a

⁴ Further complicating matters, the biblical witness in Exodus 12 recalls a period of four-hundred, thirty years of oppression; but, in examining the genealogies that link Genesis to Exodus no more than a century could have passed. This can be explained by the common practice of telescoping genealogies in order to highlight a particular clan or member of the clan for the sake of posterity.

unified and cohesive message; on the other, as generation after generation contributed to the shaping of tradition, the sacred authors demonstrated a willingness to reinterpret Israel's story in light of new circumstances.

As the second book of the Pentateuch, the book of Exodus follows after the patriarchal narratives. Its opening geography directly links the unfolding story to the end of Genesis and the families of Jacob, especially Joseph. Joseph's story serves as a narrative bridge, carrying the reader from God's relationship with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob into God's covenant engagement with their descendants in Egypt. Exodus thus provides the crucial transition from the tribal beginnings of the patriarchs to the national identity of Israel as God's covenant partner.

The book of Exodus, then, provides the key link from the tribal beginnings of the Patriarchs to the national status of the Israelites as God's covenant partners. The book will also initiate a shift in the social and religious practices of Israel based on how they view their relationship with the LORD God. The God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, who was revealed as the creator God, will now unveil a new manifestation of glory demonstrated in the revelation of the divine name.

This revelation is best summarized in the creedal formulas found throughout the Old Testament. Through these ancient confessions, Israel bears witness to God's deliverance from Egypt—the central affirmation of Exodus and the model for salvation in the Old Testament. These creeds present a fourfold declaration:

- Remembrance of the Covenant – Remembering the covenant with the patriarchs and matriarchs means to remember a covenant rooted in the promise of land and safety. As a confession made from an already realized rootedness, as a people planted in the land and invested in the temple, this confession reminds Israel of the rootlessness of their ancestors and prompts them to a life of thanksgiving.
- Acknowledgement of Slavery in Egypt – Acknowledging their ancestor's slavery and oppression in Egypt identifies themselves with the same and invites Israel to be a people who hears the cry of injustice and responds with deliverance.
- Recollection of God's Deeds of Power – Recalling God's deeds of power and signs of wonder affirms that Israel's reliance does not rest merely on the God who says but on the God who has done.
- Recognition of Deliverance – Realizing the outcome of God's deliverance means stability and life in the abundant land. This is a reality that, as the prophets demonstrate, is in jeopardy if Israel is faithless to their own covenant responsibility.

There is perhaps a fifth part to the creed, unspoken but very much real, that is: Israel's lived response to God's mercy through worship, justice, and compassion (see Micah 6:8). In Exodus, this is embodied in the Sinai experience and the reception of the law, without which Israel could

not know how to live with and for a holy God. Failure in covenant life risks concealing the divine presence—not as punishment, but as the natural consequence of unholiness before the Holy One.

To read Exodus rightly, one must understand its formative events through the theological lens of God's abiding presence. The entire narrative may be epitomized in the movement of God's fiery manifestation—from the bush on the sacred mountain, to the descent upon Sinai before all Israel, to the divine rest within the tent-sanctuary. Exodus recounts the stages in the descent of the divine presence, revealing how the LORD takes up dwelling among the peoples of the earth.