

Book of Exodus

Week 1 — “Let my people go”

(Exodus 1–6)



Introduction

Welcome to this survey of the Book of Exodus.

This book tells how God released Jacob's descendants from oppressive human rule, and formed them into his nation — the first nation to have God as their sovereign. After breaking Egypt's military power at the Red Sea, God led his people to Mount Sinai. There they received his Law and entered into a legal covenant: they would be his people and he would be their sovereign.

The heavenly king instructed them to build a tent where he would live among them and direct their nation. He instructed them how to build a suitable design, and commissioned the royal attendants (priests). The book reaches its peak when they complete his palace (tabernacle). The heavenly sovereign moves in, and leads his nation (Exodus 40:34-38).

We have two sessions each evening, so here's how we'll approach it:

2018	Topic	Exodus
# 1 12 Mar	“Let my people go!” a) How God's people became slaves b) Two realities: God and oppression	1 – 2 3 – 6
# 2 19 Mar	“I am YHWH” a) Purpose of the plagues b) Death and deliverance (Passover, Red Sea)	7 – 10 11 – 14
# 3 26 Mar	A kingdom of priests a) Israel's new ruler b) A nation under divine law	15 – 19 20
2 Apr	Easter break	
# 4 9 Apr	Covenant a) Laws of the covenant b) Committing to God's kingship	21 – 23 24 – 25
# 5 16 Apr	God's house a) Tabernacle and sacrifices (provisions for God) b) Servants and furnishings for God's house	26 – 27 28 – 31
# 6 23 Apr	Faithfulness a) Israel's unfaithfulness versus God's faithfulness b) Finishing what they began: God among his people	32 – 34 35 – 40

Outline

Exodus establishes Israel's national identity in relation to God:

- **Whose people? (Ex 1–14):** Pharaoh claims the descendants of Jacob as his slaves. YHWH commands, "Let *my* people go!" YHWH wins this conflict, and liberates his people.
- **Whose kingdom? (Ex 15–24):** YHWH leads his people to Sinai where he establishes Israel as a nation. As their king, he gives them his laws. The covenant establishes YHWH as their sovereign and Israel as his kingdom.
- **Whose dwelling? (Ex 25–40):** The king instructs them in how to build a tent where he can live among them and lead them. They complete the tent. He moves in and directs their nation.

Exodus 1 – 14: Whose people? — Liberated by YHWH

Exodus 1	How power corrupts human rulers
Exodus 2	Combatting evil with evil won't work
Exodus 3	The royal encounter
Exodus 4	Trusting the heavenly ruler
Exodus 5 – 6	The struggle against injustice
Exodus 7 – 10	God's mighty acts: the initial plagues
Exodus 11 – 13	Release through the final plague
Exodus 14	The Red Sea

Exodus 15 – 24: Whose kingdom? — Covenanted to YHWH

Exodus 15	The salvation song
Exodus 15 – 17	Regal providence
Exodus 18	Sharing the responsibility for justice
Exodus 19	Israel meets her ruler
Exodus 20	The foundational commandments
Exodus 21	Gaining perspective on the law
Exodus 22 – 23	What the law reveals about God
Exodus 24	Committing to the covenant

Exodus 25 – 40: Whose dwelling? — YHWH among his people

Exodus 25	The palace and the throne
Exodus 26 – 27	Tabernacle: holy space for God
Exodus 28 – 29	Royal servants (priests)
Exodus 30	Incense altar, census tax, laver, oil, incense
Exodus 31	Craftsmen, Sabbath
Exodus 32	Misrepresenting God (golden calf)
Exodus 33	Going without God?
Exodus 34	The sovereign's character
Exodus 35 – 39	Constructing YHWH's dwelling (obedience)
Exodus 40	God among his people

Relevance

Why does the Exodus story matter? Without it, there would have been no nation of Israel. The Old Testament (OT) constantly refers back to the exodus as the foundation of their nation, with the promise that God will complete what he began.

Without Exodus there would be **no Israel, no redemption, no Torah, no temple, no Jews, no Jesus, no New Testament, no hope for the world**. The whole narrative of the Bible grows out of the exodus.

The Exodus story was front and centre for Jesus. He planned his final journey to Jerusalem to coincide with Passover, the annual celebration of the exodus. He used Passover to explain the meaning of his death.

In Jesus, the whole world will experience what Israel experienced in the Exodus. Earth will be liberated from oppressive rule, and military powers will cease. All nations will come into the kingdom of God, the reign of his appointed ruler, Messiah Jesus. God and humans will be reconciled as sovereign and citizens, and God will live among his people. What God did for Israel in the exodus, he will do for the whole earth in Messiah Jesus.

Title

Exodus means exit, departure, way out.

Sometimes it's capitalized (Exodus); sometimes it isn't (the exodus):

- With a capital, *Exodus* means the book named Exodus.
- In lower case, the *exodus* means Israel's journey out of Egypt.

So, Exodus (the book) describes Israel's exodus (journey).

Setting

Please don't believe everything you find in the Internet about the exodus. There are some outlandish claims from unreliable sources. For example, Ron Wyatt claims to have found the ark of the covenant, Noah's ark, and everything in between. There is no archaeological evidence of the exodus to corroborate the narrative in the Bible.

Around **1260 BC** seems most likely date for the exodus.¹ If so, the Pharaoh would have been Rameses II (1290–1213). Some scholars prefer an earlier date: 1440 BC, under Thutmose III (1490–1436).

The period from 1550–1069 is called the *New Kingdom* in Egypt's history. It covers Dynasties 18–20. The great pyramids were built long before this time.

¹ William Sanford La Sor, David Allan Hubbard, and Frederic William Bush, *Old Testament Survey: The Message, Form, and Background of the Old Testament*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1996), 59–60.

Israel left Egypt for Canaan, but we're unsure of the route.

The northern part of the Red Sea has two arms:

- Gulf of Suez (closest to Egypt, Suez Canal today);
- Gulf of Aqaba (north eastern arm, towards the Dead Sea).

The Nile Delta is very different to 3,300 years ago, but Israel probably crossed the Red Sea near the northern end of the Gulf of Suez.

Map
3



Possible geography of the exodus.²

They travelled to Mount Sinai, which is somewhere in the Sinai Peninsula (the triangle between the two gulfs and the Mediterranean).

At least 20 different sites have been proposed for Mount Sinai. The map shows the traditional site, Jebel Mûsâ (Mountain of Moses).

² *Standard Bible Atlas*. (Cincinnati: Standard Publishing, 2006), 7.

The story so far (Genesis)

God delegated to humans authority to rule over his creation, but not authority to rule over each other.³ Humans were meant to be under God's rule (the kingdom of God). But when people don't submit to God, human rule is the only viable alternative: anarchy produced the unsustainable violence that precipitated the flood.⁴

After the flood, God made a covenant with Noah and his sons that he would never give up ruling humanity, no matter how difficult we were to manage.⁵ He permitted the nations to have rulers,⁶ but not to take over the whole earth.⁷ So how would God bring the nations back under his rule?

His plan was to establish a nation of his own, a nation under divine rule, a nation called to show the nations what they were missing.⁸ God repeated this promise to the following generations: to Isaac,⁹ and Jacob (also called Israel).¹⁰ In subsequent generations, the 12 sons of Jacob became the 12 tribes of Israel.

The brothers sell Joseph into slavery. Nevertheless, Joseph ends up guiding the most powerful ruler in the region: Pharaoh. The promise to Abraham is partially fulfilled. Many lives are saved (Genesis 47:25; 50:20). Israel's family lives in Goshen (north-east Egypt).

How God's people became slaves

Have you seen the 2014 movie, *Exodus: Gods and Kings*? It opens with an epic battle between the Egyptians and Hittites. Ridley Scott (director) introduced that scene to establish the power of Egypt, the greatest power in the Mediterranean in the ancient world.

The Bible tells the story from the opposite perspective: the experience of the slaves. Unlike Ridley Scott, the Bible doesn't glorify human power and military might: it subtly undermines the powers that run the world. Human rulers are necessary, but God alone can handle power. Human rulers always turn oppressive in the end, just as Pharaoh does in Exodus 1.

³ allenbrowne.blog/2016/05/09/what-it-means-to-be-human-genesis-1/

⁴ allenbrowne.blog/2016/05/30/is-there-any-justice-genesis-65-22/

⁵ allenbrowne.blog/2016/06/08/gods-commitment-to-reign-genesis-97-17/

⁶ allenbrowne.blog/2016/06/03/human-government-a-concession-genesis-91-6/

⁷ allenbrowne.blog/2016/06/15/can-the-nations-take-over-gods-reign-genesis-11/

⁸ allenbrowne.blog/2016/06/27/yhwh-launches-a-nation-of-his-own/

⁹ allenbrowne.blog/2016/10/10/isaac-the-next-kingdom-representative/

¹⁰ allenbrowne.blog/2016/11/14/jacobs-life-in-gods-house/

Exodus 1: How power corrupts human rulers

Exodus opens by recapping how Israel's family came to Egypt, a family of 70 people. 430 years later,¹¹ they've grown into a great multitude (1:1-7).

The new Pharaoh has no recollection of Joseph or God's wisdom through the Abrahamic family (1:8). He's afraid these multiplying slaves might turn against him (1:9-10), so he *afflicts them with heavy burdens* (1:11). The Hebrew verb *'ā-nāh* means to oppress or humiliate. It's also used of rape (e.g. Gen 34:2; Deut 22:24; Judges 20:5; 2 Samuel 13:12; Lam 5:11). Rape is an apt description of what evil rulers do: they force themselves on people.

Pharaoh's plan backfires: *the more they were oppressed, the more they multiplied* (1:12). Egypt's king is so fearful of losing power that he issues the most inhumane command: kill the Hebrew boys who could grow up to be warriors and resist him (1:16).

Ultimately, death is the power tyrants use to keep their power. If their enemies won't respond to threats, they use violence: assassination, oppression, military force, war. The Bible is full of these stories.

King Herod did something very similar to keep his power when Jesus was born (Matthew 2:16). The leaders of Jerusalem needed to kill Jesus to keep their power (John 11:48). To break the grip of evil, Jesus had to face and break the grip of death.

Resistance to Pharaoh rises from the most unexpected source: not the strong males, but the midwives. How did these women have such courage to defy Pharaoh? Why weren't they afraid of Pharaoh?

Exodus 1:17 (ESV)

But the midwives feared God and did not do as the king of Egypt commanded them ...

In the OT, *the fear of the LORD* means not daring to disobey him. They recognized God as greater than the king of Egypt, so they fear God more than they fear Pharaoh. This is crucial: it's repeated in 1:21.

God's people must recognise the heavenly monarch, drawing from him the wisdom and strength to resist the unreasonable demands of earthly oppressors like Pharaoh. God is greater than any oppressive ruler. God alone is to be feared. He will sort out evil.

The midwives give life, while Pharaoh takes lives.
Who represents God's rule here?

¹¹ See Exodus 12:40-41; Galatians 3:17

Exodus 2: Combating violence with violence won't work

Again in Exodus 2, the women are the heroes who defy evil rule:

- Jochebed (Moses' mother) dares to keep her baby alive by floating him on the Nile in a basket (2:1-3).
- Pharaoh's daughter finds the baby in the basket, and defies her father by keeping him alive (2:5-6).
- Miriam (Moses' sister) watched over the baby, spoke with the princess, and arranged for their mother to raise Moses (2:7-8).

Moses has a dual identity. He is Hebrew by birth, but he is raised and educated as an Egyptian, ironically at Pharaoh's expense (2:9).

The unjust treatment of the Hebrews disturbs Moses. He responds to the violence with violence. Now, that is the plotline of most Hollywood action movies where the goodies always win and the baddies lose, but it doesn't work like that in real life. Moses kills the oppressor (2:12). And people talk (2:14).

When it's the life of a slave versus the life of an Egyptian, the courts will provide no justice. Pharaoh wants Moses dead (2:15). Moses gives up living like a prince in Egypt, and flees for his life (2:15).

This is important: God's kingdom is not established by using the weapons of injustice against injustice. We face the temptation to strike out at those who strike others, but Moses had to learn that this is not God's way. Human anger can never bring divine justice. Violence is never the path to peace.

Moses the fugitive flees across the Sinai Peninsula to Midian (south-east on the map above). He finds injustice there too. The flocks of the shepherd girls are driven back and made to wait by the male shepherds. Moses intervenes for them. He doesn't resort to violence, but he does stand against injustice. He's rewarded. The girls' father hears their story and gives Moses a place to stay (2:16-17).

Moses' identity is so ambiguous in this story. Based on his clothing and demeanour, the girls call him an *Egyptian* (2:19). Imagine how the Jewish audience would have responded to that designation as the story was read over the years!

But it gets worse. Moses marries Zipporah, and settles into life as a Midianite. He's no longer a Hebrew or an Egyptian. He's now part of this Midianite culture. This lack of identity shows up in the name he gives their first son: *Gershom* sounds like "foreigner" (2:22).

So how is evil ever resolved? The king of Egypt is so much more powerful than Moses in exile. Will the oppression go on forever?

Some 40 years later, something changes: “the king of Egypt died” (2:23). That’s the thing about human rulers in contrast with God (Psalms 82:7; 90:2-3; 103:15-17; 118:6-8; 146:3-4). Evil human rulers come and go, but the eternal ruler lives on and fulfils his promises.

The descendants of Jacob raised a cry to God because of their oppression (2:23). God responded because he had committed himself to these people. God had made a covenant — a legally binding agreement — with Abraham and his descendants for ever (Genesis 15 and 17). On the basis of this prior commitment, God acted to rescue his people from oppression under human rule. He had promised to make them a nation under divine rule, so he would do so.

The verbs of 2:24 establish the expectation of what God will do:

God heard ... God remembered ... God saw ... God knew.

Two realities: God and oppression

Some people look at all the trouble in the world and conclude, “There is no God!” Others look at the power of God and claim, “I’m reigning with Christ, so my family will suffer no oppression!” The Bible’s message is that God and the oppression are both real. God is reigning, but the earth is oppressed because of rebellion against God’s reign.

So far in Exodus, Moses knows about the oppression. He’s in exile. He’s about to have an encounter that gives him the other truth.

Exodus 3: The royal encounter

Moses has fled to the wild and deserted places where human rulers have little interest. Unlike the verdant Nile Valley, the wilderness is a place where nomads eke out pickings for their flocks.

Far into the wilderness, Moses stumbles across Horeb, i.e. Mount Sinai. It’s *God’s mountain* (3:1).

Fire is danger to people and herds in the wild. It’s guaranteed to gain a bushman’s attention. Moses sees a flame in a bush. The flame is an angel:

3:2 (ESV) The angel of the LORD appeared to him in a flame of fire out of the midst of a bush. He looked, and behold, the bush was burning, yet it was not consumed.

So who is this *angel of YHWH*? Some theologians identify it as YHWH himself (or even as Christ in the OT) because what the angel says is what YHWH says. I think it works better to take the text seriously and understand angel as a heavenly messenger. The angel sounds like YHWH speaking because it brings YHWH’s message.

This passage makes sense if you think of YHWH as the great sovereign who rules heaven and earth. Here, far from the pomp and palaces of Pharaoh or other rulers, Moses has stumbled across God's mountain — the place where people encounter the divine sovereign. This is God's desert sanctuary, a palace of the heavenly king.

Before the king speaks, he sends a messenger to gain Moses' attention (3:2). Moses responds (3:3), so the divine sovereign now addresses Moses (3:4). He instructs Moses to remove his shoes as one would do when entering a temple or palace). Without realizing it, Moses has entered God's wilderness palace.

The divine sovereign plans to liberate the descendants of Jacob from oppression and form them into a nation under his rule in Canaan (3:7-8). He commissions Moses as his servant:

3:10 Come, I will send you to Pharaoh that you may bring my people, the descendants of Israel, out of Egypt.

Moses the murderer doesn't have good memories of trying to liberate his people. He himself is a fugitive, "Who am I?" he asks (3:11). God responds, "That's not the point. It who I AM" (3:14).

YHWH is the I AM, the ever-being-one, the one who was and is and is to come, the sovereign who never dies. Four centuries after Jacob died, the faithful sovereign lives on to fulfil his covenant commitment to his people. Did you notice that in verse 10 above: *my people!*

When I AM delivers his people, Moses is to lead them to this mountain. Here at his wilderness palace, Israel will become his people, covenanting themselves to *serve* their heavenly king (3:12).

God will give his people the name by which they, his covenant people can call on him. When he established covenant with the patriarchs, he revealed the name by which they could call on him: El Shaddai (6:3). Now, in the Sinai covenant, he reveals the name by which his nation can call on him. In Hebrew, this name is YHWH (related to the verb to be). Our translations use small caps to represent this name: the LORD:¹²

3:15 (ESV) God also said to Moses, "Say this to the people of Israel: 'The LORD, the God of your fathers, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob, has sent me to you.' This is my name forever, and thus I am to be remembered throughout all generations.

These are wonderful foundational promises for the coming nation of Israel. But how will it happen? Moses versus Pharaoh? Seriously?

¹² allenbrowne.blog/2017/11/29/should-christians-use-the-divine-name/

This is going to take an act of God. Actually it will take several mighty acts:

3:19–20 ¹⁹ But I know that the king of Egypt will not let you go unless compelled by a mighty hand. ²⁰ So I will stretch out my hand and strike Egypt with all the wonders that I will do in it; after that he will let you go.

Exodus 4: Trusting the heavenly ruler

Moses doesn't believe he can get the Israelites to follow what he says, let alone Pharaoh! He doesn't have enough power in his hands. *Hand* is the keyword in this chapter.

What does he have in his hand? A shepherd's staff. God calls him to let go. It takes on a life of its own, so Moses himself runs from it (4:1-5). You can be sure he never looked at that staff the same way again. It's no longer Moses' staff: it's *the staff of God in his hand* (4:20).

Moses puts his hand inside his cloak. When he brings it out, it's covered in leprosy. Then Moses' afflicted hand is restored. Moses' hand is that hand of God. God has put miracles *in your hand* (3:21).

Moses returns to Egypt with a message that Pharaoh has no valid claim over the Hebrew people as his slaves:

4:22–23 (ESV) ²² Then you shall say to Pharaoh, 'Thus says the LORD, Israel is my **firstborn son**, ²³ and I say to you, "Let my son go that he may **serve** me."

The descendants of Jacob (Israel) are God's family. The promise to Abraham was that God would restore the blessing of his governance to the nations through them. Through the exodus, God gives birth to the nation of Israel. They become the first of many nations that will have God as their sovereign. That makes them YHWH's firstborn.

YHWH's demand is that Israel be released from **servicing Pharaoh in slavery**, to **serve YHWH as a son**. Big difference between God's rule and evil rule.

Pharaoh will resist YHWH's claim, so YHWH speaks to Pharaoh in the language human kings understand — a threat:

4:23b If you refuse to let him go, behold, I will kill your firstborn son.

It's no idle threat. It's a hint of the final plague. Pharaoh will be given a dose of his own medicine. Death is the weapon tyrants understand.

As Moses is obediently making his way back to Egypt, *YHWH confronted him and tried to put him to death* (4:24). It's something God could do if he was really trying, so we should understand it as

God challenging Moses. The challenge is resolved when Zipporah circumcises their son, Gershom (4:25-26). Given that Gershom means stranger and they've all been living as strangers in Midian, the challenge must be about their identity. Are they part of the covenant family or not? If they are, every member of the household must be circumcised (Genesis 17:10-14). So if Moses has not circumcised his son, they're all living as foreigners to God's covenant.

Once Moses' identity is cleared up, YHWH directs his brother Aaron to come out to welcome him back. Aaron meets him at God's mountain, and prepares the elders of Israel to listen to Moses (4:27-31).

Exodus 5: The struggle under injustice

The Bible is a revelation of God. The whole point of the Book of Exodus is to reveal God. Who is God? What is he like? What authority does he have? What is he saying?

5¹ Afterward Moses and Aaron went and said to Pharaoh, "Thus says the LORD, the God of Israel, '**Let my people go**, that they may **hold a feast** to me in the wilderness.' "

2 But Pharaoh said, "**Who is the LORD**, that I should obey his voice and let Israel go? I do not know the LORD, and moreover, I will not let Israel go."

Pharaoh does not know YHWH or recognize his authority. All he understands is that his slaves want time off to go to a party.

So Pharaoh's first impression of YHWH is as a party God! It's true: Every Israelite listening to the story knew that three times a year they were downed tools and head off to Jerusalem for a festival holiday.

Pharaoh's in a bind. He can't give in without capitulating to YHWH's authority. But if he doesn't give in, he's an ogre, the slave driver who won't give his people a break. The contrasting story of two rulers—YHWH and Pharaoh—has begun.

Moses insists they go and *sacrifice* to YHWH (5:3). Now, please don't think of sacrifices as something individual Israelites did to atone for their personal sins. We'll talk more about this later, but sacrifices were **meals with God**. They sacrificed the animals to God as a gift; then they sat down and ate in fellowship with God. Note the parallel: to obey YHWH's command to "hold a feast to me" (5:2), Moses says they must "sacrifice to YHWH" (5:3).

So how do you stop people thinking about holidays? Don't give them time to think about it. Pharaoh makes them work harder. They have to collect their own materials to make bricks, without reducing the target tally (5:4-19).

It puts the Israelite foreman slaves in an impossible position. They turn against Moses for making their plight worse (5:20-21). Moses passes the accusation to his up-line: “You have not delivered your people at all” (5:23).

YHWH responds, “You’re afraid of Pharaoh’s strong hand? When I’ve finished with him, his strong hand will throw you out” (6:1).

Exodus 6: The saviour revealed

The narrator pauses now to focus us on who really governs the affairs of the world. It’s not Pharaoh, but the covenant God of the patriarchs who has now revealed his name at Sinai: YHWH (6:2-4). He is the sovereign over his people, and he will rescue them from their oppression and give them their own nation (6:5-9).

Once again Moses is commissioned as YHWH’s prophet. A prophet is not someone who predicts the future; it is a spokesman who delivers the message of the divine sovereign. Moses simply delivers the message; YHWH makes it happen (6:10-13).

The question of Moses identity has now been settled. Many times throughout Israel’s history, they will prove to be as unresponsive to YHWH’s message as the uncircumcised nations were (those who were not part of God’s covenant people). As we’ve seen, Moses’ own identity has been open to question: how could he be God’s spokesman when he has been someone of “uncircumcised lips” (6:12)?

But Moses’ identity has been settled. He’s not an Egyptian. He’s not a Midianite. He’s someone who recognizes and obeys the God of Israel. Now that that’s settled, the narrator can disclose Moses’ identity. Moses is a descendant of Israel, through Levi (6:14-26).

Moses may protest all he likes against his appointment as YHWH’s mouthpiece (6:28-30). It is God who acts, so to Pharaoh Moses will look like God (7:1).

Conclusion

As the Hebrews experienced in Egypt, there is much injustice in a world ruled by powers that refuse to submit to the heavenly sovereign. The heavenly monarch has a plan to deliver people from evil, but it doesn’t happen instantly. In fact, the confrontation between the heavenly sovereign and the earthly powers can and sometimes does increase the suffering of God’s people. Their hope and even their faith can be stretched to breaking point.

Nevertheless, the heavenly sovereign remains faithful to his commitment to rescue his people. The unfinished story of the rescue of creation is the on-going revelation of his character.

Memory verse

Exodus 6:7 (NIV)

I will take you as my own people, and I will be your God.
Then you will know that I am the LORD your God,
who brought you out from under the yoke of the Egyptians.

Take home exercise

Over the next five weeks, we encourage you to read through the Book of Exodus — eight chapters per week. So for next week, read Exodus 1 – 8.

Scan back over the introductory section, to make sure you have the big picture of how the Exodus story fits together as a whole, and how the rest of the Bible rests on this foundation. Jot down any questions you'd like to ask.

For a brief overview of what the story means and how it fits together, consider buying this book. It's useful background on every book in the Bible.

- Gordon D. Fee and Douglas K. Stuart, *How to Read the Bible Book by Book: A Guided Tour*. (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2002).
Available from [Koorong](#) or [Book Depository](#) (paperback), [Kindle](#) or [Logos](#) (digital).

If you want a commentary specifically on the Book of Exodus, we recommend this one:

- Douglas K. Stuart, *Exodus*. New American Commentary. (Nashville: B & H, 2006).