

# EXODUS

exodus (*ex* – “out of,” *hodos* – “road,” “way”)

## GOD REMEMBERS

“And God heard their groaning, and remembered his covenant with Abraham” (2:24). In Hebrew “to remember” is to take positive action based on the covenant relationship established earlier. E.g. **“God remembered Noah” and therefore caused the waters to recede** (Gen. 8:1); and **“Remember the sabbath day, and to keep it holy”** (20:8). Jesus Himself will invoke this Hebrew concept of remembering at the Last Supper: **“do this . . . in remembrance of me”** (1 Corinthians 11:25).



## THE DIVINE NAME: I AM WHO AM. YAHWEH.

Confronted by God’s presence in the Burning Bush, Moses protests that if he tells the people of Israel that God has sent him to them, they will ask, ‘What is His name?’ In antiquity, people believed in many gods, and also believed that the character or identity of a god was expressed in the *name*. Therefore people would want to know which god had chosen to show favor on them; or likewise which god they may have offended. In effect, Moses was simply asking, “Who are you?” God then reveals two names for Moses. First he declares, “I AM WHO I AM,” which can be translated, “I AM WHAT I AM.” In the Greek, it is translated “I AM HE WHO IS.” That is, God is the eternal God Who IS. God has no beginning or end; He has been, is, and always will BE. God is not a “being” among beings but is Being or Existence Himself.

Ancient Hebrew had no written vowels, so YHWH was not pronounced. When vowels did eventually appear, to avoid breaking the second commandment (**“You shall not take the name of the Lord, your God, in vain,”** Deut. 5:11), the Jews substituted another Hebrew word, “Adonai” (which means “Lord” or “my Lord”). Catholic tradition follows the Greek translation of the original word YHWH (**“And God said to Moses, ‘I am the Lord.’”** 6:2). Throughout the New Testament YHWH is rendered “Lord.”

## WHY THE PROMISE OF A LAND FLOWING WITH MILK AND HONEY?

In chapter three God promises the people of Israel that He will rescue them from Egyptian slavery and lead them into a land “flowing with milk and honey.” The reference to “milk” indicates a land with broad pastures to support many livestock. “Honey” suggests a vast farmland replete with plants from which bees could draw nectar.

## HARDENING OF PHARAOH’S HEART

When we read that God “hardened Pharaoh’s heart (7:3), it is not as if Pharaoh’s heart—or attitude—was *indifferent* toward the Jews. Pharaoh had already enslaved the Jews and decreed that any new born male child was to be killed. Pharaoh was not an innocent victim of a cruel God Who was “forcing” him do something he did not want to do. By this time Pharaoh’s heart was already hardened due to his many sins against humanity, that is, against the Jews. Thus Moses’ call to let the people go served only to provoke Pharaoh’s hostility toward them. Therefore when we read, “But I will harden Pharaoh’s heart, and though I multiply my signs and wonders in the land of Egypt, Pharaoh will not listen to you; . . .”, it is actually Pharaoh’s moral degeneracy and obstinate refusal to heed the Lord’s command that continued the hardening of an already hardened heart (7:3-4).

## BRICKS AND STRAW

Generally a half pound of straw was mixed in a cubic foot of clay mixture, which was then kneaded with bare feet for four days. Nile River clay contains very fine particles and so dries slowly. Adding straw to

the clay "opens up" the clay to allow it to dry more quickly in the sun. In addition, straw contains chemicals that increase the tensile strength of the bricks in much the same way that rebar or wire mesh reinforces concrete today. Bricks made without straw would have broken and crumbled more easily.

### **WHY UNLEAVENED BREAD?**

Unlike the matzah (matzo) purchased today, the biblical matzah was most probably not a cracker-type bread but more like a soft tortilla. This "wrap" was often eaten with roasted meat and bitter herbs. In fact, matzah was a common ancient food in the Middle East, especially for one in a hurry. For example, in Genesis 19:3, Lot serves matzah to his unexpected guests. Likewise the medium who urged King Saul to eat: **"Now the woman had a fatted calf in the house, and she quickly killed it, and she took flour, and kneaded it and baked unleavened bread of it, and she put it before Saul and his servants; and they ate"** (1 Samuel 28:24-25). So it was not unusual for the Jews' last meal in Egypt to be unleavened bread as they hurriedly prepared to leave: **". . . for it was not leavened, since they had been driven out of Egypt and could not delay; nor had they prepared any provisions for themselves"** (12:39).

### **MANNA FROM HEAVEN**

Despite the suggestions of some biblical commentators that the food God provided in the wilderness was a kind of congealed sap from a desert shrub that grows in the Sinai Peninsula, or that it was the emission of a kind of insect native to the desert, shrubs or insects never could have produced enough food to feed thousands. Moreover Exodus states plainly that *manna* (literally, "what is it?" from the Hebrew, "man – hû") was a supernatural phenomenon in that twice the usual amount appeared on Friday and none on the Sabbath. The *manna* from heaven was simply one of the seven miracles of God in the deliverance of Israel.

### **WHO WERE THE AMALEKITES?**

Ever since young Jacob tricked his twin brother, Esau, out of their father's (Isaac) blessing, which was Esau's birthright as the first born, Jacob and Esau remained unreconciled (Genesis 27:1-36). This became a blood-feud that continued down through the generations. The Amalekites—descendants of Amalek, the grandson of Esau—controlled the caravan routes between Arabia and Egypt and were sworn to destroy Israel in retribution for the wrong done to Esau (17:8-16).

### **HOW DO WE COUNT THE 10 COMMANDMENTS?**

The Ten Commandments are widely perceived as a universal code of ethics. Within Judaism, the two tablets of stone engraved with the Ten Commandments adorn synagogues and numerous Jewish ritual objects. The Hebrew Bible clearly states there are ten commandments. What is less clear is how the ten are to be counted. Judaism separates the commandment against other gods (20:3) from the prohibition of idols (20:4) to form two commandments. Likewise, prohibitions against coveting wives and other people's property are combined into one final commandment (20:17). There is also the Catholic (and Lutheran) method of counting since the time of St. Augustine. Following the text of Deuteronomy (Deut. 5:7-21), Catholic tradition understands the prohibition of worship of gods and idolatry as one commandment, but distinguishes the prohibition of lust (Deut. 5:21a) from the prohibition of avarice (Deut. 5:21b) to form the ninth and tenth commandments.

Note: The commandment, "You shall not kill" is more precisely translated, "not slay," "murder" (Numbers 35:16-28). The commandment not to kill does not absolutely prohibit all forms of killing—such as in self-defense—but rather the murder or slaying of innocent human beings.

### **WHY THE SPRINKLING OF BLOOD AT MOUNT SINAI?**

When Moses reads from the "book of the covenant" and received the people's consent (24:3), he offers animal sacrifice (24:5). Such rituals were often performed to solemnize a significant moment such as the sealing of a covenant. Moses takes half the blood and sprinkles it on the altar, and after asking again for the people's consent, sprinkles the rest of the blood on the people. The blood establishes a familial

relationship with God Who is represented by the altar. Thus the blood is thrown on both the altar and the newly created family of God as a sign of unity. In addition, the shedding of blood is also a warning: *“May my blood be shed like the blood of animals if I do not fulfill my covenant obligations.”* Although God is clearly the superior in this relationship, the ritual of sprinkled blood demonstrates the mutuality of the covenant between God and Israel. Note also that after the blood sacrifice is offered at the foot of Mount Sinai, representatives climb to the top of the mountain and into God’s presence where “they beheld God, and ate and drank.” Shared meals typically follow ritual sacrifice. In this way the covenant that God formed with the people at Mount Sinai, like the Passover meal eaten the night of their exodus from Egypt, is completed not by sacrifice alone but by a shared meal (24:9-11). Since one of the distinctive marks of a family is eating together, the Passover meal signifies the familial relationship between God and Israel (Genesis 31:44-54).

## **CROSSING THE RED SEA**

While scripture scholars debate whether it is the Red Sea or “Sea of Reeds,” from the 1st century onward, the New Testament Christian tradition has consistently interpreted the Hebrew for “Red Sea” and not as “Sea of Reeds.” E.g., St. Stephen’s sermon in Acts 7:36 – **“He (Moses) led them out of Egypt and performed wonders and signs in Egypt, at the Red Sea and for forty years in the wilderness.”** And Hebrews 11:29 – **“By faith the people passed through the Red Sea as on dry land; but when the Egyptians tried to do so, they were drowned.”** In 1 Kings 9:26, King Solomon is building a fleet of ships on the shore of the Red Sea in the land of Edom, which was hardly practical if that body of water were merely a marshy area or a small, shallow lake. Finally, the Red Sea really does look red at times due to periodic blooms of algae, which turn the sea a reddish brown color. Regardless, the Bible is clear that God supernaturally parted a large body of water so the Israelites could cross on dry land; and when the Egyptian army attempted to follow, the Egyptians were destroyed in an overwhelming flood.

## **THE GOLDEN CALF AND THE BROKEN TABLETS**

The dramatic story of the Golden Calf occurs soon after the Exodus from Egypt. Up till then at least sixteen generations of Jews had become thoroughly immersed in Egyptian culture, including its customs and pagan worship. No surprise therefore that as soon as crisis struck, their faith and trust in God faltered. When they complained of hunger and thirst, they even thought of returning to their former Egyptian overlords (16:2-3). Complicating matters was the “mixed multitude” of non-Jews who also wanted to be free from slavery and took advantage of the Jew’s chaotic exit from Egypt and joined the caravan: **“Moreover, a mixed multitude went up with them, and very much livestock, both flocks and herds”** (12:38). Later at the base of Mount Sinai, this “mixed multitude”—and with the support of the Jews themselves—prod Aaron to make them an idol because they thought Moses had abandoned them. They believed such an idol was needed before which they could offer sacrifices for “divine” favor along their journey. Compounding the sin of idolatry was the feasting, dancing, and “play” (Hebrew euphemism for promiscuous sexual activity that typically accompanied Canaanite worship) that followed (32:6). This was the form of “spiritual adultery” that the ancient prophets routinely condemned. Thus the Lord’s covenant was often framed in matrimonial terms; hence, infidelity to the covenant was likened to marital infidelity.

## **WHO WERE THE LEVITES?**

The Levites were one of the twelve tribes of Israel, descendants of the twelve sons of Jacob. When the people worshipped the Golden Calf at the base of Mount Sinai, the only tribe that did not participate was the tribe of Levi (one of Jacob’s sons); hence, the Levites were judged untainted by the sin of idolatry and as a result were given the duties of worship and sacrifice. During the Wandering in the Desert, the Levites tended the portable Tabernacle and Tent of Meeting. They packed up, transported, and reconstructed the Tabernacle whenever the Israelites traveled to a new camp.

## WHAT WAS THE TABERNACLE OR TENT OF MEETING?

The tabernacle refers to the place where Yahweh dwells among His people. The “tent of meeting” was a place of meeting between Yahweh and Israel through Moses. The Tabernacle itself was inside a large courtyard (75 by 150 ft). In the center of the courtyard stood a large copper altar for animal sacrifices. Between the copper altar and the entrance of the sanctuary stood the laver or large basin where the priests washed their hands and feet. The sanctuary walls (45 by 15 ft.) were made of thick, gold-plated, acacia-wood (cedar) beams. The sanctuary roof was a tapestry woven of linen and wool and covered over by a layer of red-dyed animal skins. The sanctuary interior was divided by a hanging tapestry. The anteroom or the *Holy* contained the golden seven-candle *menorah* and a golden table upon which the priests placed show-bread or “presence bread.” Presence bread was to be constantly before the Lord’s presence (Ex. 25:30). There was also a smaller golden altar upon which incense was offered twice daily. The second, innermost room was the *Holy of Holies*, which contained the Ark: a gold box that housed the Tablets and other sacred items. On the cover or “Mercy Seat” of the Ark (where the blood of sacrificed animals was splattered, imploring God’s mercy for forgiveness), were two golden angels with outstretched wings facing each other. No one except the High Priest was permitted to enter the *Holy of Holies*, and even then he would do so only once a year on the Day of Atonement (Yom Kippur). The Tabernacle was made to be portable as Israel journeyed in the wilderness for forty years before entering the Promised Land. Thus the activity of the whole of Exodus is oriented toward the communion-through-worship enabled by the construction of the Tabernacle. The Sinai Covenant and its laws were given to form Israel into a holy people able to commune with God in worship. This is the liturgical orientation of the entire Book of Exodus; for the initial deliverance is about *worship*; the conflict between the Pharaoh and Israel centers on worship; and the overall exodus from Egypt culminates in worship. In this light, the liturgy of the tabernacle-sanctuary is the “bandage” that wraps the “wound” of the people who sinned on Mount Sinai in their idol worship of the Golden Calf.

