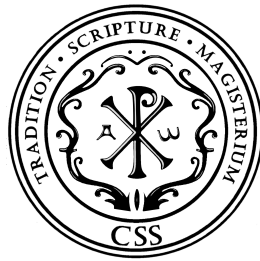
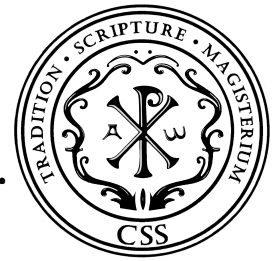


# Exodus

*A Bible Study by Dr. Scott Hahn and Mark Shea  
Edited by Jennifer Phelps*



# Exodus



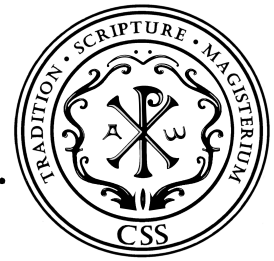
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## Introduction

# Exodus



## 'A Road Out' for God's People

Early World	Patriarchs	Egypt & Exodus	Desert Wanderings	Conquest & Judges	Royal Kingdom	Divided Kingdom	Exile	Return	Maccabean Revolt	Messianic Fulfillment	The Church

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## Exodus Introductory Material

### The Prototypical Faith Journey: An Age-Old Story of Redemption and Revelation

Christians refer to the second book of the Old Testament as Exodus, from its Greek Septuagint title, *Exodos*, which means “a road out of.” This expresses the main theme of the book—the mass migration of the people of Israel out of northern Egypt. There are a surprisingly large number of events in the Old Testament story of the Exodus that directly relate to contemporary Christianity, including the idea that the spiritual life is a kind of pilgrimage. For more than 3,000 years, the Judeo-Christian tradition has looked on the Exodus as the prototypical faith journey and on the Promised Land as heaven. The Hebrew title for the work is taken from the opening words of the book—in this case, *we’elleh shemot*, meaning “these are the names” (*Ex* 1:1)—and the phrase refers to the names of the children of Israel who had moved to Egypt at the conclusion of the book of Genesis. The book of Exodus deliberately links its story to that narrative, and continues to follow the Israelites on their journey out of Egypt. The book itself ends with a description of the glory of the Lord dwelling among his people in a cloud by day and in a pillar of fire by night, and with the descendants of Israel still journeying toward the Promised Land.

A profound book with a gripping story, Exodus takes for granted—and constantly reminds readers—that God is the powerful force behind all of the supernatural events recorded in its pages. Underlying everything is God’s revelation of himself to his chosen people through his name, his actions, and his laws. He begins by revealing his holy name—“I AM WHO I AM” (*Ex* 3:13-14)—and his divine Fatherhood (*Ex* 4:22). Then God turns his attention to delivering the Israelites from bondage in Egypt and guiding them to safety (*Ex* 13:21). When they’re wandering in the desert, God provides them with food and drink (*Ex* 16:1—17:7), and he instructs them in the way of wisdom, which includes his gift of the Ten Commandments (*Ex* 20:1-17) as well as teaching them the correct manner to worship him on the sabbath (*Ex* 31:12-17). At crucial moments throughout the book of Exodus, God reveals intimate details concerning who he is and how he acts—information about his glory, his divine mercy, and his steadfast love (*Ex* 34:5-7). At the very heart of the story of Exodus is a God who’s faithful to the covenant promises he swore to Abraham. The central message of the book of Exodus is that the Creator of the universe is a loving God intent on fulfilling his promises to the people he’s chosen to call his own.

## Christian Perspective

The Exodus is an inexhaustible source of imagery, and it's an event that foreshadows and parallels the ultimate act of redemption and revelation in Jesus Christ. The Church always has seen layers of spiritual meaning surrounding the historical events of the Exodus. The Ten Commandments, which are at the heart of the ethics of the people of Israel, also are at the heart of Christian teaching about morality and life (*Mt* 19:16-19 and *Rom* 13:8-10). The apostles, early Church Fathers, and countless other Christian thinkers have seen in the events recounted in the book of Exodus the Spirit-inspired signs pointing to God's mighty act of redemption in Jesus Christ. The deliverance from bondage in Egypt prefigures Christians' deliverance from the slavery of sin. The crossing of the Red Sea "baptizes" the people of Israel into Moses just as sacramental Baptism incorporates Christians into the body of Christ, the Church (*1 Cor* 10:1-2). The Passover feast celebrates the Exodus itself and foreshadows the sacrament of the Eucharist, in which Christians feast on the body and blood of Jesus Christ, the true Passover Lamb of God, and are delivered from death to life (*1 Cor* 5:7 and *1 Pet* 1:18-19). The manna in wilderness, the water from the rock, the bronze serpent, and many other details in Exodus are seen as types of the full revelation given only with the Incarnation of Jesus Christ and the arrival of the Gospel. The tabernacle is a type of the humanity of Jesus, as well as of the heavenly sanctuary and of the Church, the body of Christ (*Heb* 9:1-28).

## Authorship

The authorship of the book of Exodus poses an interesting problem for Scripture scholars, and one that isn't easily resolved. The traditional view is that the book was written by Moses, but there's speculation that it's the work of multiple authors. The idea of several authors is fairly recent (it was introduced within roughly the past 200 years) and has undergone modifications. For obvious reasons, such a theory denies Mosaic authorship and instead envisions the book of Exodus coming together over a long period of time, between approximately 900 and 400 B.C. Yet even many advocates of this idea grant that the religious traditions reflected in Exodus are much older than their written form. There's little agreement among Scripture scholars about which passages originate from which sources, who edited them, when, or why.

The basic premise of the multiple-source theory holds that the book of Exodus is a composite woven from several different Hebrew sources, each with its own separate history and author or authors. According to this theory, the story line of Exodus may have come from two narratives written during the period of the Israelite monarchy. One of these alleged narratives referred to God as "Yahweh" (this is called the "J" source), and the other referred to God as "Elohim" (the "E" source). In addition, the laws given on Mount Sinai are surmised to have come from yet a third source, one focused on priestly legislation written after the Babylonian Exile (this source is labeled "P"). Later versions of this theory argue that these various sources were oral, not written, and that they were combined before or during the process of being committed to writing.

In contrast to these hypotheses is the view that's dominated both the Jewish and Christian traditions for many centuries—namely that Moses is the author not only of Exodus but of all five books of the Law (Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy). Collectively, these five books are known as the Pentateuch or Torah. According to the book of Exodus itself, Moses

was literate (*Ex* 17:14), and he wrote down the laws of the covenant revealed by God at Mount Sinai (*Ex* 24:4). There are other Old Testament passages that attest to Mosaic authorship of the Pentateuch as well (*Num* 33:2 and *Deut* 31:9). In this, they reflect the view of Mosaic authorship universally shared by Jews and Christians until the early 19th century.

Modern scholarship hasn't dismissed the idea that Moses wrote the first five books of the Old Testament. While it would have been impossible for Moses to write about his own death and the circumstances following it (*Deut* 34:5-12), respectful adherence to the traditional view of Mosaic authorship of the Pentateuch doesn't rule out the possibility that some later editing occurred. The Catholic Church's official affirmation of the "substantive Mosaic authenticity and integrity of the Pentateuch" was promulgated by the Pontifical Biblical Commission in 1906. More recent statements from the Magisterium reflect prudent flexibility in the way that the Catholic Church maintains the traditional view of Mosaic authorship, and many non-Catholic scholars, both Protestant and Jewish, accept and defend Mosaic authorship. Those interested in further study are referred to Kenneth Kitchen's book, *On the Reliability of the Old Testament*, and to Scott Hahn's *A Father Who Keeps His Promises*.

## Date

If the claim of Mosaic authorship is accurate, then this necessarily means that the book of Exodus must be dated to the time of Moses. Reading biblical chronology literally and counting back 480 years from 966 B.C., the fourth year of King Solomon's reign (*1 Kings* 6:1), sets the time of Moses and the Exodus about 1400 B.C. (although another chronology places Moses and these events somewhat later, about 1200 B.C.). Additional testimony to the antiquity of Exodus is provided by comparative studies that show marked similarities between the Covenant Code in the twenty-first through twenty-third chapters of the book of Exodus and other ancient Near Eastern legal documents such as the Babylonian Code of Hammurabi (believed to have been written about 1700 B.C.). Similarly, the Mosaic description of tabernacle architecture reflects the use of movable tent-sanctuaries in ancient Egypt during the second millennium B.C. It's known that the covenant procedures described at Mount Sinai were common at that same time. And the author of Exodus displays detailed familiarity with local conditions, something that would be highly unlikely a thousand years after the events being recounted—such things as the agricultural calendar of Egypt (*Ex* 9:31-32) and the fact that acacia wood could be acquired on the Sinai Peninsula (*Ex* 25:10). In short, Exodus reads like a book that comes from the time in which it claims to be written, rather than reading like one coming from a later period and written by an author far removed from the places, events, and institutions described.

When considering who really wrote the book of Exodus, readers are reminded that scholarly conjecture about the authorship of the Pentateuch remains just that—conjecture and not fact. It's conjecture that stands against the plain sense of both the Old and New Testament, thousands of years of Jewish and Christian tradition, and the repeated magisterial teaching of the Church. Whatever the case regarding the authorship of Exodus, the Church, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, teaches in *Dei Verbum* (the Second Vatican Council's Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation) that the true author is God himself:

## **Exodus Introduction**

Those divinely revealed realities which are contained and presented in sacred Scripture have been committed to writing under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit. For holy mother Church, relying on the belief of the apostles (see *Jn* 20:31, *2 Tim* 3:16, *2 Pet* 1:19-20, and *2 Pet* 3:15-16), holds that the books of both the Old and New Testaments in their entirety, with all their parts, are sacred and canonical because written under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, they have God as their author and have been handed on as such to the Church herself. In composing the sacred books, God chose men and while employed by him they made use of their powers and abilities, so that with him acting in them and through them, they, as true authors, consigned to writing everything and only those things which he wanted.

Therefore, since everything asserted by the inspired authors or sacred writers must be held to be asserted by the Holy Spirit, it follows that the books of Scripture must be acknowledged as teaching solidly, faithfully and without error that truth which God wanted put into sacred writings for the sake of salvation.

### **Themes**

The book of Exodus describes how the enslaved tribes of Israel become the covenant nation of the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob—a God who reveals his name as “I AM WHO I AM.” The theology of Exodus then follows the epic story of a journey from Egypt to Mount Sinai, from national deliverance to covenant communion.

The first movement of the book of Exodus focuses on the theme of deliverance in the first through eighteenth chapters. The story deals with the awesome rescue of the Israelites from Egypt, based on God’s promises to Abraham and his descendants. God calls Moses to lead the people of Israel to freedom. From the scene of this extraordinary drama, God guides the people toward the wilderness of Sinai, with the intention of ultimately bringing them to the Promised Land of Canaan. Before deliverance is complete, Pharaoh’s army attempts one final assault. In response, God parts the waters of the Red Sea, and the Hebrews miraculously escape. When the chariots of Pharaoh pursue the people, God drowns the Egyptian army in a victory that’s been celebrated ever since. Soon, the Israelites are at war again—this time with the Amalekites—and God once more comes to the aid of his chosen people, granting them another victory.

The second main movement of the book of Exodus begins after God at last brings the Israelites to Mount Sinai. The latter half of the book—the nineteenth through fortieth chapters—focuses on the making, breaking and renewal of the covenant between God and the Israelites. At Mount Sinai, the people enter into a covenant relationship with God, who’s brought them out of bondage in Egypt, and God and the Israelites are united in a bond of sacred kinship and mutual commitment. Set forth in the laws given at Mount Sinai, the covenant terms initially consist of the Decalogue, or Ten Commandments, and a code of social and religious ethics. After the people commit a terrible act of apostasy by idolizing a golden calf that they themselves have created, additional legislation is given to the Israelites to serve as a reminder of the nation’s sin. The Church sees in this a reminder as well of the reality of original sin that can only be healed and forgiven through the grace of Jesus Christ.

The final portion of the book of Exodus also deals with a great mass of laws regarding the construction and furnishing of the portable sanctuary known as the tabernacle. Here God will dwell with his family, the people with whom he keeps his covenant. When he institutes these laws, God is asking the people of Israel to reflect his own purity and goodness, a covenantal requirement that will shape their life and liturgy for all time.

## **Structure**

The complex story of Exodus may be structured in various ways. Some analyses highlight theological themes with a view to the two great actions of God—the divine redemption of Israel (1:1—18:27) and the Divine Revelation given to Israel (19:1—40:38). Other analyses follow a geographical outline according to movements of Moses and the nation of Israel. Seen this way, the book of Exodus is a drama in three parts—Israel in Egypt (1:1—13:16), Israel in the wilderness (13:17—18:27), and Israel assembled at the foot of Mount Sinai (19:1—40:38).

## **Outline of Exodus**

### **1. Divine Redemption and Deliverance from Egypt (1:1—18:27)**

- A. Israel Groans in Egypt (1:1-22)
- B. Moses' Early Years (2:1—4:31)
- C. Confrontation with Pharaoh (5:1—7:13)
- D. Ten Plagues (7:14—11:10)
- E. Passover (12:1-51)
- F. Exodus (13:1—15:27)
- G. Journey to Mount Sinai (16:1—18:27)

### **2. Divine Revelation at Sinai (19:1—40:38)**

- A. Covenant at Mount Sinai (19:1—24:18)
- B. Pattern of the Tabernacle (25:1—31:18)
- C. Golden Calf Apostasy (32:1—33:23)
- D. Renewal of the Covenant (34:1-35)
- E. Construction of the Tabernacle (35:1—40:33)
- F. God Dwells in the Tabernacle (40:34-38)

## Catechism Connections

- To learn the three criteria that the Church teaches are essential to interpreting Scripture in accordance with the Holy Spirit, see paragraphs 112-114 of the *Catechism of the Catholic Church (CCC)*.
- For more information about how Old Testament figures and events serve as “types” (or prototypes) of the fulfillment of God’s plan in the person of Jesus Christ, see CCC 128-130.

## Rome to Home

Pope John Paul II wrote that the Bible is the “path to happiness” because through the words of Scripture God reveals fundamental morality.

In the Bible, God not only reveals himself but also the path to happiness. This is a theme that regards not only believers but, in a certain sense, every person of good will. Through the Bible, God speaks and reveals himself and indicates the solid basis and certain orientation for human behavior. The fundamental behaviors of biblical morality are: knowing God, the Father of Our Lord Jesus Christ; recognizing his infinite goodness; knowing with a grateful and sincere soul that ‘all good giving and every perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of lights’; discovering in the gifts that God has given us the duties that he has entrusted to us; and acting in full awareness of our responsibilities in this regard. The Bible presents to us the inexhaustible riches of this revelation of God and of his love for humanity.

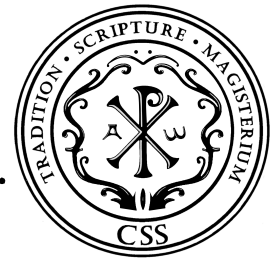
—speaking to the 2004 assembly  
of the Pontifical Biblical Commission

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## Lesson 1

# Exodus



## *The King Who Did Not Know Joseph*

Early World	Patriarchs	Egypt & Exodus	Desert Wanderings	Conquest & Judges	Royal Kingdom	Divided Kingdom	Exile	Return	Maccabean Revolt	Messianic Fulfillment	The Church

## Introduction

The book of Exodus assumes readers are familiar with Genesis, the introductory book of the Bible—especially with God’s covenantal promises to Abraham and his descendants, Isaac and Jacob, and with the story of Joseph and how the people of Israel came to be in Egypt. In the book of Exodus, many moral lessons exemplified in the lives of the patriarchs are codified into law. The same Jesus Christ toward whom “Moses and the prophets” point illuminates in a brand new way the mysteries found in Exodus. Some of the patterns played out in this Old Testament book are as relevant as today’s headlines. More than 3,000 years ago Pharaoh told his Hebrew slaves in Egypt that there were too many of them. Today, Satan, the prince of this world, tells his slaves much the same thing. Like Pharaoh, Satan still seeks to enact “population control” in an attempt to keep people in political power from feeling too threatened.

## Exodus 1:1-22

**1** <sup>1</sup>These are the names of the sons of Israel who came to Egypt with Jacob, each with his household: <sup>2</sup>Reuben, Simeon, Levi, and Judah, <sup>3</sup>Issachar, Zebulun, and Benjamin, <sup>4</sup>Dan and Naphtali, Gad and Asher. <sup>5</sup>All the offspring of Jacob were seventy persons; Joseph was already in Egypt. <sup>6</sup>Then Joseph died, and all his brothers, and all that generation. **<sup>7</sup>But the descendants of Israel were fruitful and increased greatly; they multiplied and grew exceedingly strong; so that the land was filled with them.**

<sup>8</sup>Now there arose a new king over Egypt, who did not know Joseph. <sup>9</sup>And he said to his people, “Behold, the people of Israel are too many and too mighty for us. <sup>10</sup>Come, let us deal shrewdly with them, lest they multiply, and, if war befall us, they join our enemies and fight against us and escape from the land.” <sup>11</sup>Therefore they set taskmasters over them to afflict them with heavy burdens; and they built for Pharaoh store-cities, Pithom and Raamses. <sup>12</sup>But the more they were oppressed, the more they multiplied and the more they spread abroad. And the Egyptians were in dread of the people of Israel. <sup>13</sup>So they made the people of Israel serve with rigor, <sup>14</sup>and made their lives bitter with hard service, in mortar

## Exodus 1:1-22

and brick, and in all kinds of work in the field; in all their work they made them serve with rigor.

<sup>15</sup>Then the king of Egypt said to the Hebrew midwives, one of whom was named Shiphrah and the other Puah, <sup>16</sup>“When you serve as midwife to the Hebrew women, and see them upon the birthstool, if it is a son, you shall kill him; but if it is a daughter, she shall live.” <sup>17</sup>But the midwives feared God, and did not do as the king of Egypt commanded them, but let the male children live. <sup>18</sup>So the king of Egypt called the midwives, and said to them, “Why have you done this, and let the male children live?” <sup>19</sup>The midwives said to Pharaoh, “Because the Hebrew women are not like the Egyptian women; for they are vigorous and are delivered before the midwife comes to them.” <sup>20</sup>So God dealt well with the midwives; and the people multiplied and grew very strong. <sup>21</sup>And because the midwives feared God he gave them families. <sup>22</sup>Then Pharaoh commanded all his people, “Every son that is born to the Hebrews you shall cast into the Nile, but you shall let every daughter live.”

*[Please Note: One of the best ways to meditate on God’s Word is through memorization. A suggested memory verse is always highlighted in the Scripture text, or you may choose a verse of your own.]*

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## Study Questions

**It’s best to read all of Exodus 1:1-22 and *Points to Ponder* before responding to the study questions. To aid in discussion, please note Scripture verses where you find your responses.**

### The Sons of Israel Who Came to Egypt

#### Exodus 1:1-7

1. Where did Jacob and his family live before coming to Egypt, and why did they move? What kind of relationship did they have with the Egyptian pharaoh at that time (see *Gen 47:1-6*)?
  
2. **But the descendants of Israel were fruitful and increased greatly; they multiplied and grew exceedingly strong; so that the land was filled with them.** In Scripture, “fruitfulness” means fertility in all aspects of life—children, family, crops, and herds—and it connotes the

blessing of God. How is the type of fruitfulness mentioned in Exodus 1:7 (our suggested memory verse), related to one of the promises God made to Abraham (see *Gen 15:1-6*)?

### **There Arose a New King**

#### **Exodus 1:8-14**

3. In Exodus 1:8, what does the word “know” suggest in the Hebrew language? What does this disclose about the relationship between the pharaohs of Egypt and the descendants of Israel? Why is it important that this new king, or pharaoh, “did not know Joseph”?
  
4. What do the Egyptians fear in Exodus 1:9-10? What was the political position of the Israelites in Egypt during Joseph’s lifetime (see *Gen 47:27*)?
  
5. What are the heavy burdens that the people of Israel are afflicted with in Exodus 1:11-14? What is the sign that God still is with them?

### **The Midwives Feared God**

#### **Exodus 1:15-22**

6. In Exodus 1:15-16, Pharaoh seeks to kill only the male children of the Hebrews. Why does Pharaoh single out the boys (see the *Rome to Home* excerpt from *Evangelium Vitae* by Pope John Paul II)?

### **Exodus Lesson 1 Study Questions**

7. Why do the Hebrew midwives refuse to comply with Pharaoh's edict in Exodus 1:17? Fear of God is one of the seven gifts of the Holy Spirit. What are the other six, and what effect do they have in the life of a Christian (see *Isa* 11:2-3 and *CCC* 1831)?
  
8. How does God react to the Hebrew midwives' refusal to kill babies?
  
9. The New Testament writers address the issue of how Christians should respond to requests made by those in positions of authority. What does St. Paul advise the Christians in Rome to do as citizens, and who does he see as the governing authorities (see *Rom* 13:1-7)? In Acts of the Apostles, how do Sts. Peter and John react when they're told not to speak about Jesus Christ (see *Acts* 4:19-20)?
  
10. In Exodus 1:22, to whom does Pharaoh address his order to kill the Hebrew boy babies, and how does this compound Pharaoh's evil?

### **Questions for Reflection**

**The following questions are designed to help you reflect further about how ideas in Exodus 1:1-22 might apply to your own life:**

1. Pharaoh was unfaithful to the covenant his ancestors had made with Joseph, but God remains ever-faithful to his covenant with Abraham. Think of a time when you've felt betrayed by someone close to you. Did this betrayal affect your ability to trust others? Why, or why not? How do you think the ideas of religious faith (having faith in God) and fidelity (being faithful to a loved one) are related?

2. A sure indicator that a culture has become deeply corrupt is when it starts to kill its children. List some parallels between the reasons given by Pharaoh thousands of years ago and the reasons given by abortion advocates today for allowing children to die. What are some steps Christians can take to defend life?

## Opportunities for Additional Study

### Points to Ponder—*Exodus 1:1-22*

#### Exodus and the Gospel

Many Catholics are more comfortable reading the New Testament than the Old. This isn't a modern phenomenon. During the early years of the Church, the heretic Marcion openly voiced what many Christians still secretly think in the back of their minds—that the God revealed in the Old Testament is a God primarily concerned with wrath and judgment while the God of the New Testament is full of love and mercy. The heresy of Marcionism went so far as to say that Jesus Christ had defeated the God of the Old Testament, and to insist that the Jews had been chosen not by God the Father but by a sort of wicked spirit from whom Jesus came to deliver humans. Most people don't go to such heretical extremes. They simply decide it's easier to stick with the Gospels and other familiar books of the New Testament—and they avoid studying the book of Exodus and other Old Testament writings. Behind this kind of thinking is the mistaken idea that the Old Testament Scriptures are somehow outmoded.

Jesus teaches to the contrary when he says: “Do not think that I have come to abolish the law and the prophets; I have come not to abolish them but to fulfil them” (*Mt 5:17*). In fact, Christians who are unfamiliar with the Old Testament—particularly with the book of Exodus—can be stymied by the related references found in the New Testament. The book of Exodus is filled with Christian symbolism, and the Christian faith abounds with Exodus and Passover imagery. The Eucharist was instituted in the context of the Passover and is itself the fulfillment of the Passover (*Lk 22:14-15*). The Ten Commandments still bind Christian believers. In the Gospels, the Exodus is one of the principal images used by Jesus to describe deliverance from sin through the waters of Baptism. It's also a dominant image of the final book of the New Testament, The Revelation to John (the Apocalypse).

In the Septuagint (the Greek version of the Old Testament) the Hebrew word *qahal*, which means “assembly,” is translated into Greek as *ekklesia*, a word that's the root of the English word “ecclesiastic.” In the New Testament, *ekklesia* usually is translated as “church.” It's the word that Jesus himself is recorded using in Matthew's Gospel to refer to his followers as a group (*Mt 16:18* and *Mt 18:17*). This image draws heavily from the story of the Exodus and is based on the wilderness wanderings of the people of Israel. The Church also is depicted on pilgrimage in search of the city of Zion (*Heb 13:14*). In this, the New Testament writers are following the tradition of Jeremiah and other Old Testament prophets who prophesied that during the messianic age, the Israelites would experience a new Exodus greater than the original Exodus (*Jer 16:14-15* and *Jer 23:7-8*). The Christian faith is rooted in the events surrounding the Exodus.

## **Exodus Lesson 1 Points to Ponder**

In describing the person and work of Jesus Christ, the New Testament draws heavily on imagery from all of the first five books of the Old Testament, but especially from Exodus.

### **Practical Wisdom of the Torah**

The book of Exodus opens with a sort of bridge connecting it to Genesis, the first book of the Old Testament. The reason is simple—the Law of Moses is one continuous scroll containing the first five books of the Old Testament (Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy). All five of these books constitute Old Testament law—not just the Ten Commandments or the ceremonial prescriptions found in Leviticus. It's here that contemporary readers encounter a major difference between the modern-day conception of law and the ancient Hebrew understanding of it. For the people of ancient Israel, the historical narratives of Genesis and Exodus constitute law every bit as much as the Ten Commandments (also known as the Decalogue).

Hebrew religious law (or Torah) isn't something that can be reduced to statutes or rules and regulations. Instead, it includes the idea of the way to attain wisdom. In Hebrew society, the person who gives Torah (teaches religious law) would be the father of a family and not a legal professional. Sons were instructed in the law by their fathers in order to learn wisdom and the way of life. By the time of Jesus, the Pharisees had emerged as a class of legal professionals who devoted themselves to studying, teaching and interpreting Jewish religious law. When contemporary Christians encounter the word "law," it carries negative connotations associated with rules and regulations. To the Hebrew mind, however, Torah evokes God's fatherly favor in showing his children the way of life in a dark and baffling world.

Torah consists of practical wisdom. As St. Paul discovered, commandments don't create moral people. In fact, they tend to evoke rebelliousness (*Rom 7:7-25*). In the book of Exodus, this problem arises when God is giving the law to the Israelites, a race of fallen people. How can people be taught morality if they're not already righteous? Commandments, blessing and curses aren't enough. Every parent knows this. One of the surest ways to get a child to do something is to say: "You'd better not do that." Somehow, the itch to find out if he or she really will get in trouble compels the child to do what's been forbidden. Telling the same child: "Good things will happen if you do this disagreeable thing" (for example, homework), usually is met with skepticism. Torah (Hebrew religious law) solves this problem by beginning with stories. Before a student encounters "you shall not commit adultery," "you shall not steal," and all the rest of the "you shall nots" (*Ex 20:1-17*), Torah tells stories about people who did things that are contrary to the law, and students can observe the results for themselves. The book of Exodus assumes readers are familiar with some of these stories—those that can be found in Genesis, the first book of the Old Testament. Solid knowledge of the entire book of Genesis is necessary to understand Exodus, the second book of the Bible, but several stories are particularly important in connection with the law given at Mount Sinai. The story of the incestuous origins of the Ammonites and Moabites (*Gen 19:30-38*) establishes the background of nations that pose a severe threat to the Israelites when they reach the Promised Land. Included in the recounting of divine judgment against the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah is the ugliness of the Sodomites' treatment of Lot and his guests (*Gen 19:1-29*). Jacob brings much suffering on himself as the result of his theft of his brother's birthright (*Gen 25:27-34*). Jacob's unhappiness in regard to the injustice

involving his marriages to Leah and Rachel (*Gen 29:16-30*) is echoed in the suffering inflicted on Joseph by his brothers (*Gen 37:12-28*). Without an understanding of these narratives, the rules and statutes of the book of Exodus and the rest of Torah appear to be little more than a collection of empty do's and don'ts. When read in the context of the Genesis narratives, however, the judgments of the law make solid sense.

## **The Pharaoh Who Did Not Know Joseph**

Although Genesis ends on a happy note with the people of Israel comfortably settled in Egypt: “Thus Israel dwelt in the land of Egypt, in the land of Goshen; and they gained possessions in it, and were fruitful and multiplied exceedingly” (*Gen 47:27*), Exodus immediately opens to a story of crisis and betrayal. Exodus 1:8 provides the key to why this is: “Now there arose a new king over Egypt, who did not know Joseph.” In Hebrew, the word translated to English as “know” implies far more than knowing the capital of France or knowing who George Washington was. In Hebrew thought, to know someone is to have a sacred covenant relationship with them. Through the prophet Amos, for instance, God tells the people of Israel: “You only have I known of all the families of the earth; therefore I will punish you for all your iniquities” (*Amos 3:2*). This doesn't mean that God is unaware of the existence of the rest of the human family. Rather, it means that at Mount Sinai when God entered into covenant relationship with the people of Israel, it was a covenant with them alone.

In Matthew's Gospel, Jesus addresses what it means to know God when he warns: “Not every one who says to me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ shall enter the kingdom of heaven, but he who does the will of my Father who is in heaven. On that day many will say to me, ‘Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and cast out demons in your name, and do many mighty works in your name?’ And then will I declare to them, ‘I never knew you; depart from me, you evildoers’” (*Mt 7:21-23*). This doesn't mean that Jesus won't have any idea who these people are. It means that by their infidelity to Jesus' commands, they'll be strangers to him.

A covenant establishes a bond of sacred kinship between those entering into it. When Exodus 1:8 records that “there arose a new king over Egypt, who did not know Joseph,” the author isn't saying that the new king, or Pharaoh, was ignorant of Joseph or had never heard of him. Rather, he's explaining that there's been a political upheaval in Egypt and that the new Pharaoh deliberately has chosen to break the longstanding covenantal bond between Egypt and the Israelites. At the conclusion of Genesis, Joseph was prime minister in Egypt, and he wielded real power. Goshen, where the Israelites settled, was no slum. The area consisted of some of the best land in the country. Like all covenants, the covenant relationship between the people of Israel and the people of Egypt that had been entered into through Joseph's mediation included an intergenerational dimension. Both parties—in this case Israel and Egypt—are bound to one another in ongoing fidelity.

When Pharaoh refuses to honor the covenant already in place between Egypt and the descendants of Israel, his actions have political and spiritual consequences. Pharaoh's political and economic motivations are obvious. The Israelites have done well in Egypt. Joseph's relatives own the best land, are multiplying rapidly, and are prospering. The spiritual ramifications of Pharaoh's actions will prove to be grave. Despite the miraculous guidance Joseph received from God and used to aid Egypt in a time of famine, a later Pharaoh will declare that he “knows” neither Joseph's kin

## **Exodus Lesson 1 Points to Ponder**

(descendants of the 12 tribes of Israel) nor the deity that Joseph's descendants worship (the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob).

To curb what he sees as a growing threat from the Israelites, Pharaoh forces the Hebrews into servitude, and he launches an attempt to take over their property. When Joseph was second in command in Egypt, he acquired land "for Pharaoh." In reality, he and his family controlled this land, and since the time of Joseph, the Israelites steadily have been gaining more property. To regain this lost land, the new Pharaoh settles on a "quiet" policy of property theft. He orders all the Hebrew male children killed. The reasoning behind this dreadful decree is that within a generation there will be very few Hebrew men, so Hebrew women will of necessity be forced to marry Egyptians. The title to the Hebrew women's property would then pass to their Egyptian husbands.

The murder of babies in Pharaoh's day is similar to legal abortion today. At the time of Moses, as now, some people of conscience stood against this horrible tragedy. As a result of refusing to cooperate with Pharaoh's edict, the Hebrew midwives were blessed with families. Those who refuse to resort to abortion today also receive one of God's greatest blessings, the blessing of children. In the time of the Exodus, additional blessing came to the whole world through the birth of Moses, the man chosen by God to play a pivotal role in salvation history.

## **Catechism Connections**

- To learn more about why Jesus chose the time of Passover, introduced in the book of Exodus, to institute the Eucharist, see CCC 1339.
- CCC 1950 teaches that the meaning of moral law can be defined as fatherly instruction.
- Jesus came to institute a new law, or Law of the Gospel. To learn how this new law relates to the Law of Moses, see CCC 1962 and 1968.
- For more information about the Church's teaching regarding acts that lead to the enslavement of human beings, see CCC 2414.

## **Rome to Home**

Pope John Paul II wrote that there's a parallel between contemporary birth-control practices and Pharaoh's edict that all male children born to the Hebrews were to be killed.

The Pharaoh of old, haunted by the presence and increase of the children of Israel, submitted them to every kind of oppression and ordered that every male child born of the Hebrew women was to be killed (*Ex* 1:7-22). Today not a few of the powerful of the earth act in the same way. They, too, are haunted by the current demographic growth, and fear that the most prolific and poorest peoples represent a threat for the well-being and peace of their own countries. Consequently, rather than wishing to face and solve these serious problems with respect for the dignity of individuals and families and for every person's inviolable right to life, they prefer to promote and impose by whatever means a massive program of birth control. Even the economic help that they would be ready to give is unjustly made conditional on the acceptance of an anti-birth policy.

—*Evangelium Vitae*



## Summary

### **In Exodus 1:1-22, we observed that:**

1. The list of names at the beginning of the book of Exodus presumes that readers are familiar with Genesis.
2. The first five books of the Old Testament (the Pentateuch) constitute Old Testament law.
3. Torah (Hebrew religious law) consists of more than statutes and rules—it's divine instruction pointing toward a way of life.
4. The consequences of ignoring the law are illustrated in the stories told in Torah.
5. When the new king, or Pharaoh, doesn't "know" Joseph, this implies that the new Pharaoh has broken the covenantal family bond established between the Egyptians and the Israelites during the time of Joseph.
6. The purpose of Pharaoh's oppression of the Israelites is to regain Egyptian land that's fallen under Hebrew control.
7. Pharaoh attempts a "quiet" form of ethnic cleansing by ordering male Hebrew children killed so that Hebrew women will be forced to marry Egyptians and turn over their property to their husbands.
8. The Hebrew midwives refuse to obey Pharaoh's evil law, and their obedience brings blessing not only to them but also, through the birth of Moses, to the whole world.

**Exodus Notes**

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