



# What Every Christian Should Know about Exodus

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**I**n the Exodus narrative, God provides deliverance from bondage, provision for a new community of faith, and a paradigm for his future relationship to the world. In the midst of the action, God's intentions for and mission in the whole creation are revealed. The purpose of Exodus is to establish a global reputation for this creating and redeeming God, "that the Lord's name might be proclaimed in all the earth" (Exod 9:16 NIV).

The Lord's agenda, masterfully narrated in Exodus, forms the outline for this article and the book itself:

- "Let my people go, so that they might worship me!"
- The Passover: God to be known as the creator and the redeemer of all things
- Ten Commandments: creating a good neighborhood
- God's identity revealed: a forgiving and longsuffering God
- Tabernacle: God's "dwelling" in the midst of the camp

## LET MY PEOPLE GO!

"Let my people go, so that they may worship me" (Exod 7:16): this command

*The purpose of Exodus is to establish a global reputation for the creating and redeeming God of Israel. Everything in the book serves to make the point that Yahweh alone is God. More, in seeing the work of this gracious God to transform one people, other cultures will begin to know the reality of God's enduring presence.*

announces the struggle of Exodus for freedom to know and serve the Lord. In the first chapters of the book, God rescues the people so that they may serve and worship God rather than the pharaoh. The Lord remembers his promises to the patriarchs and matriarchs to bless and to make his people a blessing. God continues to take the initiative: calling, gathering, enlightening, and keeping his people. Chapters 1–6 set the context and quickly establish the crisis of the narrative: Jacob’s descendants have prospered and multiplied in Egypt, which created a threat to a pharaoh who “knew not Joseph” (Exod 1:8 KJV). In order to limit their numbers, the pharaoh oppressed the Israelite people with forced labor and, ultimately, male infanticide. These policies were met by the multiplying power of God’s creation in continued population growth and by the midwives’ clever resistance to the pharaoh’s orders (Exod 1:15–21).

Chapter 2 begins with Moses, through whom God will deliver and shape his people. It includes Moses’ birth, deliverance, and adoption (2:1–10), his identification with “his” Hebrew people, the killing of an Egyptian, Moses’ escape to the land of Midian, his marriage to Zipporah, and the birth of their son Gershom (2:11–22). The chapter concludes with a reminder of the groaning of the people in Egypt and God’s attentive ear (2:23–25).

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The following chapters include interaction between Moses and God: Moses’ call back to Egypt via God’s appearance in a burning bush; the giving of the name of the Lord (“I am who I am”); the promise of land to Abraham’s family; and a prediction of the pharaoh’s resistance. Back in Egypt, the main question is raised: “Who will serve whom?” with the repeated themes of heavy work, servitude, making bricks, and numerous Hebrews. The difference here is that Moses and Aaron are present, called by the Lord. The initially negative effect of their encounter with the pharaoh was an intensification of the pharaoh’s demands for making bricks (5:7, 8, 10–14, 16, 18–19).

Chapters 7–12 describe God’s dramatic intervention for his people through the “plagues,” a development that creates dissonance for many readers. There are other instances in the Old Testament where God uses disaster as a weapon against injustice and rebellion.<sup>1</sup> The text itself gives the reason for their use: “that I might show you my power and that my name might be proclaimed in all the earth” (Exod 9:16 NIV). Water, weather, insects, animal health, and the light of the sun are all in God’s control. The disasters demonstrate that the God who seeks the deliverance of his people is also the God of the whole creation, even the Lord of Egypt.

<sup>1</sup>See Terence E. Fretheim, *Creation Untamed: The Bible, God, and Natural Disasters* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2010) 39–64.

The two main purposes for God's action are developed as refrains in the plague cycles: "Let my people go so that they may *worship* (or serve) me" and "so you may *know* that I am the LORD." The first refrain is a common thread that runs through chapters 4–12 (4:23; 5:1, 8, 17; 7:16; 8:1, 20; 9:1, 13; 10:3, 7–8, 11, 24, 26; 12:31). The shortened form, "Let My People Go," and its variations occur another twenty-eight times. The centrality of this theme of release from servitude to a tyrant in order to "worship" (or "serve" as the Hebrew *avad* also means) the Lord cannot be overestimated. The trajectory of Exodus 1–12 leads to the worship of and service to Yahweh in a new way of living (chaps. 20–23) and to gathering as a new community around a new place of worship (chaps. 24–31, 35–40). The crisis at Sinai also emphasizes this theme: Whom would Israel worship? (chaps. 32–34).

The second refrain, "So you may know that I am the LORD," is developed in the signs and wonders of the plagues, which reveal God's identity: "so that my name might be proclaimed in all the earth" (9:16b). *The pharaoh will know the Lord*: many times the text informs us of what the pharaoh, the king of Egypt, knows, doesn't know, or will know about the Lord (5:2; 7:17; 8:10, 22; 9:14, 29; 10:7; 11:7); *the Egyptians will know the Lord* (7:5; 9:14; 14:4, 18); and *Israel will know the Lord* (10:2; see 6:7).

## THE PASSOVER PROTECTION

The clash of wills between Pharaoh and the Lord culminates in the death and passing over of the firstborn in Egypt. God declares that all of Israel is God's firstborn son. The pharaoh is enslaving and killing that son—and must let God's firstborn go. The warning through Moses is that if the pharaoh does not let God's firstborn go, God will strike *Egypt's* firstborn. The primary question is, "Who is Lord in Egypt?" Is it the Lord of creation or the deified pharaoh?

### *God hardens Pharaoh's heart*

Readers often ask about the Lord's role in hardening hearts, which occurs most frequently in the last three plagues. Generally the pharaoh himself was responsible for hardening his own hard heart (7:13–14, 22–23; 8:15, 19, 32; 9:7, 34–35). Two different Hebrew words, both generally translated "hardened," are used interchangeably in the narrative. *Hazaq* refers to physical or political strengthening as in "making tough" or uncompassionate. *Kaved* refers to being stubborn, self-satisfied ("fat"), or self-fulfilled ("honored"). Together they represent Pharaoh's calcified will and encrusted stubbornness.

The Lord was not looking for a compromise. God actively hardened Pharaoh's heart four times during the plagues (9:12; 10:20, 27; 11:10), and after Pharaoh began preparations to pursue them to the Sea, the Lord hardened his heart (14:8) once again. The Lord wanted the people set free and permanently out of Egypt, not a renegotiated slavery.

### *The Passover of the firstborn*

The miracle of salvation from death was provided for those who accepted God's offer of grace, protection, and lordship by placing blood on their doorposts. This was not a blood ritual that fended off an angry God. God's grace had provided them with this sign of his prevenient provision of protection in the midst of general judgment in the land. The provision was part of the revelation of God's identity. The Lord himself came down to protect them (12:23, 27). The people could reject the offer by refusing to place the sign on the doorpost.

### *The meal of remembrance*

The act of remembering is both a confession of human identity and worship of God. The Passover remembrance instructions are included before the deliverance is complete (chap. 13), similar to Jesus' instruction to the disciples, "Do this in remembrance of me" (Luke 22:19). The instruction to remember is given before the act of salvation is fully accomplished. Faith is required for participation in deliverance. Surviving the angel of death in Egypt on the night of Passover depends on the willingness of families to apply the blood, stay inside the house of protection, and eat the meal together. Retelling the story, even before it is over, is the beginning of their newfound freedom—telling the truth about the creator and redeemer that the name of the Lord "might be known in all the earth."

## THE TEN COMMANDMENTS AND A GOOD NEIGHBORHOOD

The Ten Commandments are for creating a good neighborhood. The Lord's salvation from bondage was the foundation for the laws given at Sinai—laws that provided boundaries and instruction, protecting and sustaining their newfound freedom. God's purpose was to establish his people in a "good neighborhood."<sup>2</sup> The foundation of such a community is complete trust in and love of an ever-present God, including willingness to be moral—to live as those redeemed by God—and to remember God's acts of deliverance in worship. The laws secured a new community order and an ongoing means of daily remembering that they were a delivered people.

### *"You shall have no other gods before me"*

The first command protects against bondage to people like Pharaoh, who would act as an abusive, false god. The redeeming God calls the newly delivered people to acknowledge only God as creator, who made them in his own image and has personally delivered them from bondage. The corollary, "You shall not make for yourself an idol," protects against bondage to anything false, like anything made by human hands. Those who make absolutes of their own interests, their success, their own bodies, or their own lives become their own idols or "gods." The

<sup>2</sup>Patrick D. Miller, "The Good Neighborhood: Identity and Community through the Commandments," in *Character and Scripture: Moral Formation, Community, and Biblical Interpretation*, ed. William Brown (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002) 55–72.

command insists that God alone is free of the bounds of nature and of time and free to act through nature and in historical relationships with human beings.

*“You shall not make wrongful use of the name of the LORD your God”*

The second command protects against the bondage of living in a community of curses and false oaths. It recognizes that flippancy toward the creator will be paralleled by disregard for the human and nonhuman creation. An ethical corollary to this command is to use all names with respect. This command also addresses the problem of using the Lord’s name to make false oaths in court, corrupting the legal process by lying (Lev 19:12; Deut 6:13; 10:20; cf. Lev 6:3–5). The prophets exposed the misuse of the name of the Lord in a community that met to praise the Lord and then exploited others for profit (Amos 5:21–24; Isa 1:11–17).

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*“Remember the Sabbath day, and keep it holy”*

The third command protects against bondage to taskmasters or from slaving work without a day of rest. The “weekend” was created by this ancient narrative. It gave the former slaves the gift of rest from work and rest in the God who gave the commandment and who also rested on the seventh day. Sabbath commands do not begin or end with this text. Scripture has Sabbath commands for fields to rest, lying fallow; the release of debt slaves every seventh year; the required rest of working animals; and the return, every forty-nine years, of land to those who have lost it. Israel’s God was *for* oppressed workers in a way that Egyptian, Mesopotamian, and Canaanite gods and law were not. It was the “greatest worker-protection act in history.”<sup>3</sup>

*“Honor your father and your mother, so that your days may be long in the land that the LORD your God is giving you”*

God told the newly formed community to honor parents who may no longer be an economic asset in the family. The original context addresses the adult children in the community (Deut 27:16; cf. 27:20). The commandment instructs that honor (not subservience) and serious weight (*kavod*) be given to parents’ concerns and needs. Leviticus 19:3 adds “respect” (*yara*). The elder, on the other hand, was liable before God to keep the other commands: the abuse of parental authority is addressed by extension of the commands against killing (physical abuse), adultery (abuse of sexuality), and false witness (verbal abuse).

*“You shall not murder”*

The fifth command protects against a community’s bondage to violence. The

<sup>3</sup>Christopher J. H. Wright, *Deuteronomy* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1996) 76.

malicious “spilling of blood” is viewed in Scripture as an anti-creational act (a sin against the creator) that affects even the earth itself. Bloodshed “pollutes” the land (Gen 4:10–12; Num 35:33–34; Deut 21:1–9). God’s community was also commanded to respond to unlawful death through a legal system using cities of refuge rather than a system of vengeance. Violent persons were to be held responsible for the results of their actions, regardless of their social position (Num 35:31; Lev 19:15).

*“You shall not commit adultery”*

The sixth command protects against bondage to the false idea that uncommitted sexual relationships will bring satisfaction and freedom. Sexuality was not a purely private matter but constitutive of the good of the newly created community of God. The promise to bless the nations of the world through Israel could be fulfilled only if the integrity of marriages, families—and thus the community of faith—would be sustained over millennia.

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*“You shall not steal”*

The law against stealing, common in many cultures, is remarkable in Sinai law for its evenhanded penalties. The destructive effects of stealing were primarily countered not by violent suppression but by restitution. In biblical law, if restitution was not possible, the severest penalty was debt slavery. There was no penalty for stealing bread because even the poor were not supposed to be hungry. Ample grain was to be left in the fields for gleaning (see Deut 24:18–22, which reminds those now secure of their origins in slavery).

*“You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor”*

The eighth command protects against the adverse effects of both private and public courtroom lying. The original context of courtroom law is reflected in the command itself, literally translated, “You will not answer against your neighbor with a false testimony.” In Egypt, the pharaoh’s false testimony against them was that they wanted to worship God because they were too “lazy” to work. His powerful “false witness” led to the law of increased labor. God’s new community was to be a place where the truth was told. False witness is broadened to include gossip, slander, and lying against one’s neighbor in general, as in Lev 19:11–12.

*“You shall not covet your neighbor’s house”*

The ninth command protects against bondage to coveting, materialism, and acquisition. It warns that a preoccupation with material success and material measures of life will distort relationships with others. Coveting has a unique internal and radical nature. To “covet” means to desire or to take pleasure, which is some-

times seen as an internal extension of the law against stealing or false witness. The prohibition stands against the internal source of all sin: longing for things that cannot rightfully be yours. Conversely, people of God should guard their attitudes and foster gratitude.

*“You shall not covet your neighbor’s wife”*

This extension of the law against coveting revisits the common sin of adultery. Laws regulating sexuality are common in the ancient east, but the death penalty for adultery in Israel was especially severe (e.g., Deut 22:22). Adultery was considered a high-handed sin against God (Gen 39:9). Jesus removed the penalty of stoning for adultery (John 8:1–11) but did not soften the demand of the law. At many points, Jesus intensified and internalized the command against adultery, suggesting that hell was the end result of even thinking about it (Matt 5:27–28, 30b). In every culture represented in Scripture, adultery was a basic enemy of true freedom and secure families.

The Ten Commandments provided a way for the liberated slaves to maintain order and guaranteed the benefits of their freedom. Contemporary society has often reversed and inverted the commands. Coveting is our priority, sexual license is expected, extended family is ignored, and God is irrelevant. The commands, on the other hand, provide for a life centered on God, family, faithful sexuality, and property protection, in that order.<sup>4</sup>

## GOD’S IDENTITY REVEALED

God reveals himself as a forgiving and long-suffering God. The golden calf crisis at Mount Sinai forms a watershed in God’s relationship to the world (chaps. 32–34). Moses and God had left the people to their own devices to spend forty days and nights on the mountain, where God described the tabernacle blueprint at great length (chaps. 24–31). God invited the whole community to join in creating a beautiful dwelling place as a cooperative enterprise. Meanwhile, the people had asked their priest, Aaron, to throw together a god for them (32:24). This synchronous building of the golden calf by Aaron was a paltry and ironic act, and God declared to Moses that he would destroy this disloyal and ungrateful people.

God’s anguish and struggle to forgive, while still taking their sin seriously, is revealed in a series of difficult conversations with Moses from 32:7–34:7. In 32:14, God “relented” (NIV) or “changed his mind” (NRSV), a revolutionary revelation of the radical nature of God. Forgiveness and reconciliation were possible—even in the worst cases—for those who returned to the Lord. God would unrelentingly pursue his recalcitrant people and would suffer long, hoping and working for their repentance and reconciliation. This decision at Sinai contains the seeds of the incarnation of Jesus.

<sup>4</sup>Compare Wright, *Deuteronomy*, 66, who says that “God’s priorities for moral attention are: God, society, family, life, sex, property.”

*The name of the Lord*

Exodus 34:5–7 proclaims the identity (“the name”) of the Lord, echoing the revelation of the significance of the Lord’s name in chapter 3. These verses are the theological core of Exodus, and function as a confession of faith in God and his redeeming work throughout the Old Testament. Portions of this credo were repeated in a variety of formats and contexts in Israel’s history. Yahweh’s identity became the basis for Israel’s continued existence as a sinful and forgiven people.

- God is compassionate (*raham*). The relationship of compassion is based on the creator-created relationship: the Lord remembers that we are made of flesh and fade easily (Ps 78:38–39). The Greek synonym is *splanchnizomai*, the word used when Jesus was moved to compassion when healing the crowds (e.g., Mark 1:41).
- God is gracious (*hannun*). God’s grace means that the Lord often acts generously, giving gifts freely, without asking for anything in return (see Exod 22:26–27).
- The Lord is slow to anger. “Slow to anger” is literally “lengthened nostrils,” indicating that God cools his anger before dealing with his people’s sin (see Rom 2:5–8). God’s anger is a response to human sin when his beloved creation is destroyed, especially by self-destructive, sinful actions.
- The Lord is abounding in love (*rav hesed*). “Unrelenting love” or “pursuing love” best translates this form of God’s love (“steadfast love” in NRSV). Technically the word means “tenacious fidelity in a relationship, readiness and resolve to continue to be loyal to those to whom one is bound.”<sup>5</sup> The Lord’s reliable and unrelenting love stands at the center of God’s self-disclosure at Sinai.
- The Lord is abounding in faithfulness (*rav ’emet*). “Faithfulness” (*’emet*) has the basic meaning “truth” or “true.” It means “completely reliable and trustworthy.” Psalm 119 uses the word *’emet* to speak of the eternal foundation of the Lord’s law as a source of life (Ps 119:142, 151, 160).
- The Lord maintains love to thousands of generations. God “keeps” or “maintains” or “guards” and “protects” his love forever. This phrase serves as a transition between the claim of who God is and how God will deal with sin. It begins with “maintaining love” (*hesed*).
- The Lord forgives wickedness, rebellion, and sin. “Forgiving” (from *nasa’*) means “lifting a burden and carrying it away.” The Lord forgives guilt-wickedness (*’avon*). The Hebrew word has two aspects: the *guilt* of the sin itself and its enduring physical *consequences*. This word is used for the kinds of sins that have permanent results, even when the sinner is forgiven. The Lord forgives rebellion (or “betrayal” or “transgression”; *pesha’*). Rebellion against the Lord is the Lord’s complaint against Israel through the prophets (Isa 1:2, 28; Hos 8:1). The Lord also forgives generic sin (*hatta’ah*). The

<sup>5</sup>Walter Brueggemann, *Theology of the Old Testament* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1997) 217.



whole effect of using the three major words for sin is that God will forgive every kind of sin.

- God certainly will not clear away the *effects* of guilt-wickedness. Rather than focusing on punishing the guilty, this reveals God’s relation to sinners in general. Even in the context of forgiveness, sin is sin because it has natural negative consequences in the human community.
- God visits the ongoing effects of guilt-wickedness of the fathers on the children and grandchildren to the third and fourth generations. In certain circumstances, God did visit (*paqad*) his people *for their sins (hatta’ah)* in a way that constituted an added disaster (32:34–35). This is not, however, the point of the text in 34:7; rather, the ongoing impact of wickedness—even when forgiven—does remain as a negative effect upon the family and the community for a time.

#### THE TABERNACLE: MAKING A HOME WITH GOD

The tabernacle was a new paradigm for God’s relationship to the people. The Lord would not remain on the distant horizon in a cloud or unapproachable on a mountain geographically fixed at Sinai, but would travel with them toward the land of promise. God wanted to be *at home*, “dwelling” in a tent, in their midst (25:8–9).

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#### *Creation and the tabernacle*

Many elements of the tabernacle texts are also found in the Gen 1–2, establishing the tabernacle as a new creation of the Lord. The spirit of God (as in Gen 1:2) filled Bezalel and the craftsmen who created the tabernacle with creative gifts (Exod 31:1–11). Israel made the tabernacle, even as God made the world, as a dwelling place for God (Exod 25:8–9; Ps 104:1–4). The tabernacle was erected on New Year’s Day (Rosh Hashanah) to underscore this new beginning (Exod 40:2, 17). The extended tabernacle description also mirrors the seven days of creation. Seven times the Lord spoke to Moses about what the people should make (25:8; 30:11, 17, 22, 34; 31:1, 12). The word “make” (*‘asah*) was frequently used of the Lord’s making the world (Gen 1:7, 16, 25, 26, 31; 2:3–4, 18; 3:21). In the seventh speech, the Lord spoke about the Sabbath rest (Exod 31:12–18).

#### *Incarnation and the tabernacle*

John 1:14–18 uses the words and images of the tabernacle to describe what God was doing in Jesus: “The Word became flesh and made his *dwelling* among us. We have seen his *glory*” (John 1:14–15a NIV, emphasis added). The detailed descriptions of the tent of meeting as a location of God’s presence are matched by the

specificity of the person of Jesus walking in the flesh among the people (Exod 25:22; 29:42–43; 30:6, 36). The phrase “made his dwelling (‘tented’) among us” echoes the repeated words of the Lord that the purpose of the tabernacle was that “I might dwell among them” (25:8; 29:45–46).

“We have seen his glory” also reflects Israel’s experience, first on the mountain (24:16–17), but more substantially in the tabernacle (29:42–46; 40:34–38). The glory of the Lord “settled” (literally “dwelt” or *shakan*) on the tent of meeting (40:35). The Lord “dwelt” (*shakan*) with Israel in the tabernacle (*mishkan*, literally “dwelling place”) for over 300 years before the building of the temple in Jerusalem. The theme of the Lord’s “tenting” with his people is continued in Revelation, where God spread his tent of the new heavens over his people (Rev 7:15; 21:3). The book of Hebrews draws on the pattern of heaven, focused on the new creation and the image of the eternal tabernacle in heaven where Christ has become the high priest (Heb 8:2–5; 9:11; Exod 25:9, 40).

#### *The glory of the Lord at home*

The glory of the Lord filled the tabernacle (40:34–38). Moses and the people had done all they could do. The resolution of the book of Exodus comes in these last verses as the Lord’s presence is visible once again, for the first time after the golden calf episode, in the newly created tabernacle. The cloud, first seen in chapter 13 at the Sea, and last seen by the people on top of Mount Sinai in chapter 24, settled into the midst of the camp. God had come to live among them. The cloud was a sign of God’s abiding presence, mentioned six times in these last five verses, the primary visible sign of the Lord’s glory (13:21–22; 14:19–24; 16:7–10; 24:16–18; 33:9–10, 22; 34:5).

The reconciliation between the people and the Lord was expressed in their building a home together. God designed it and directed the construction through Moses. The people made and gave everything, demonstrating the dependence of love and reconciliation on mutual labor and attention to detail. The excellent work of the people was met by the Lord, who “moved into” their camp to “tabernacle” in their midst.

The book of Exodus ends with a new beginning. The last three verses look forward to the travels of the Israelites. The primary function of the cloud of the Lord’s glory would be to guide them through the wilderness (especially Num 9:15–23). It would guide them to the edge of the land of promise (as in Deuteronomy). More significant than this guidance was the fact that God had begun to dwell on earth in the midst of one people, Israel. Once God had begun to transform one people, other cultures would begin to know the reality of God’s enduring presence. ⊕

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