**Exodus The Pivotal Event of the Old Testament**

Date Written: c. 1450 BC - 517 BC

While the ***PENTATEUCH*** [first five books of the Old Testament: *Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers* and *Deuteronomy*] is concerned with the over-all story of the foundation of the KINGDOM OF GOD on earth, the *Book of* ***EXODUS*** is the pivotal event of the *Pentateuch*, the foundation of the nation as a theocratic kingdom, and the events which led immediately to this extraordinary event, around which all the other parts of the *Pentateuch* are grouped like the spokes on a wheel.

**Exodus** tells the story of the Hebrew people's enslavement in Egypt, their miraculous deliverance by the hand of the LORD and the launching of their new relationship with God.  The first section of the book (chapters 1-18) narrates the people's escape from Egypt while the second section (Chapters 19-40) describes the formation of the new covenant with God at Sinai.

The earlier *Book of Genesis* leads up to the EXODUS by explaining the origin of the people who in *Exodus* become the first citizens of the Kingdom of God on earth. It explains the call of Abraham from UR in Mesopotamia to be the forefather of this people, and how the promises made to Abraham - that his descendants would be a great people - were repeated to his son Isaac, and to his grandson, Jacob. The final part of *Genesis* tells the story about how the sons of Jacob (Israel) go down to Egypt, and how God, through Joseph, providentially prepared a place for them (*Genesis 37-50*). The immediate link between *Genesis* and *Exodus* is given in Joseph’s final words to his brothers: “*I am about to die, but God will certainly come to you and lead you up from this land to the land which he promised on oath to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob*. (*Gen. 50:24* and *46:3*).

These two sections mentioned a few minutes ago can be divided again into four key parts:

PART I: The events preparing for the EXODUS (Chapters 1-12); the oppression (chap 1); Call of Moses (chapters 2-6); the plagues leading Pharaoh to release the Israelites (chapters 7-12).

PART II: The critical event: the escape of the Israelites from Egypt and their migration to Sinai (chapters 12-18).

PART III: The fundamental event: the election of the people of God at Sinai to be HIS own divinely instituted Kingdom on earth and the COVENANT which bound the people to God, and God to them (chapters 19-24).

PART IV: Description of the Ark of the Covenant and the Tabernacle in which God takes up his dwelling among His people (chapters 25-40).

In the **first section**, we find the Israelites stuck in an oppressive Egyptian system.  The Hebrew people are enslaved, but Pharaoh's daughter secretly adopts the baby Moses, **a great-grandson of Levi**.  Moses eventually rises to prominence in Pharaoh's household and feels called to deliver the Israelites (2:11).  He makes a misguided attempt at rescuing the people by murdering an Egyptian, but he quickly flees the nation to avoid legal repercussions.  Yet after many years, God calls him to deliver the Hebrew people at the famous encounter of the burning bush and he reluctantly returns to Egypt.  Moses demands that Pharaoh release the Hebrews, but Pharaoh obstinately refuses since the LORD has hardened his heart (7:3).  To illustrate his power and convince Pharaoh to let the people go, God sends ten plagues on Egypt.  Only after the last plague in which the angel of the LORD slays first-born sons of Egypt (the Passover), does Pharaoh relent.

In Part II, the LORD protects his people from the slaying of the first-born by commanding them to celebrate a special meal and place lamb's blood on their doorposts (12).  This Passover meal is fulfilled in the life of Jesus and his institution of the Eucharist. As the people make their journey out of Egypt, Pharaoh changes his mind and comes after them with a great military force (14:5-9).  God intervenes and opens a way for them through the Red Sea and drowns the Egyptian army behind them (14:28).  Even though the LORD provides manna and quail for the people's sustenance (16), they sin by complaining to Moses at Massah and Meribah (17).

In the third section (19-24), the Hebrew people arrive at Mount Sinai to worship the LORD.  From the mountain, the LORD reveals the **Ten Commandments**, which become the foundational moral principles of Judaism and Christianity. Then after giving a few more laws, he establishes a covenant with his people in a special ceremony (24).  In the last part, what had been one Holy Tribe becomes one Holy Nation.

The rest of Exodus (25-40) describes the plans and construction of the tabernacle except for a brief section which tells of the sin of the golden calf (32-34).  While Moses is on the mountain receiving the plan for the tabernacle from the LORD, the people make a golden idol shaped like a calf and worship it.  The LORD almost destroys the people because of their infidelity, but Moses' intercession on their behalf evokes his mercy.  **The Book of Exodus concludes with the setting up of the tabernacle and God's presence coming to dwell in it as a cloud** (40).

In Exodus, **God reveals his name to Moses** [YHWH] and deepens his relationship with his people.  He makes known his power to intervene in history by freeing the Israelites from Egyptian oppression.  God shows that he wants to have "a kingdom of priests, a holy nation" (19:6).  He desires for his people to love and worship him.  Beyond that, he establishes a way for his people to relate to him.  Beginning with the Passover meal, which Jesus fulfills, God gives his people a law to teach them how to live well.  Then he gives them a plan for his house of worship, the tabernacle.  The tabernacle instructions are detailed and precise in order to beautifully express who God is and how he is to be worshipped.  The people construct it on the pattern of the heavenly sanctuary which Moses saw in his vision on Mt. Sinai (25:40).  **God intends for his holy people to live in a holy land and worship in a holy place.**

**Exodus illustrates God's power to redeem his people from oppression and his willingness to forgive sin.  It shows his desire for a loving relationship with his people and the shape he wants that relationship to take.**

Looking back again**,**

Like his forebears Abraham and Isaac, **Jacob led a semi-nomadic existence in Canaan**. He was forced by a severe famine to emigrate with his entire family to Egypt, where they settled around the beginning of the **eighteenth century before Christ**. Over the next **four hundred years the sacred text tells us nothing about the stay of the Jews in Egypt**. God makes no revelation during this period. All we know is that by the end of it the Hebrews had become a numerous, strong, hardworking people, so much so that the Egyptians, growing afraid of them, forced them into slavery; their lives "became bitter with hard service...; in all their work they made them serve with vigor" (Ex. 1:13-14). The book of Exodus (= "leaving") is a continuation of Genesis; **the fact that it takes its name from the Israelites' going out of Egypt shows the importance of this episode in the life of Israel**.  
  
 Now, after many long years of apparent silence on God's part, he keeps faith with his promises to their forebears, the patriarchs, and comes to their rescue to free them from the slavery, imposed on them by Pharaoh. As he explains to Moses, "***I have seen the affliction of my people who are in Egypt and have heard their cry because of their taskmasters; I know their suffering, and I have come to deliver them out of the hand of the Egyptians***" (Ex. 3:7-8).  
  
 Humanly speaking, the Jews can see no way out of their oppression; they are deeply depressed. God is going to come to their rescue in a very overt way. **First he chooses a man--Moses.** The episode of the basket in which his sister Miriam puts the baby Moses is a clear sign of God's special providence.  
  
 Saved from the waters of the Nile by Pharaoh's daughter and nursed by his own mother, Moses is brought up and educated in Pharaoh's own palace and becomes one of the most prominent people of his time. However--and this is very important--**he retains the faith of his forefathers and is ready to profess that faith and defend his people even at the cost of his life if necessary.**  
 One example of this is his killing of the Egyptian whom he found beating a Hebrew (Ex. 2:11-12); in doing so he was not acting out of anger but in accordance with the ***lex talionis*** which laid down that justice must be done either by the authorities or by whoever suffered the injustice. *[the law of retaliation, whereby a punishment resembles the offence committed in kind and degree.*

*"the lex talionis of feud violence and blood money" – an eye for an eye…].*

Since recourse to Pharaoh was impossible, Moses applied the law even though this meant putting his own life at risk.  
  
 The mission God gave Moses was a very demanding one, involving his whole life. From the moment that he received his definitive vocation with the vision of the burning bush his faith was often put to the test: "***He looked, and lo, the bush was burning, and yet it was not consumed. And Moses said, 'I will turn aside and see this great sight, why the bush is not burnt.' When the Lord saw that he turned aside to see, God called to him out of the bush, 'Moses, Moses!' And he said, 'Here I am.' Then he said, 'Do not come near, put off your shoes from your feet, for the place in which you are standing is holy ground'***" (Ex. 3:2-5). From this text and Moses' conversation with God, the following important points emerge:  
  
1. In his dialogue with Moses, **God's transcendence is evident**. The very ground on which Moses stands is sacred, but God allows him to stand there because he wants to give a special mission to this man in whom he has complete confidence.  
  
2. To fulfill this mission **Moses should not rely on his own resources alone**, even though he is highly educated and talented. When he learns what God wants him to do, he exclaims, "Who am I?" (Ex. 3:11), but the Lord immediately sets his mind at rest: "***I will be with you***" (v. 12).  
  
3. Before he accepts God's charge, Moses asks him what he should say when the children of Israel ask who sent him. This is the point at which God reveals his name, **Yahweh, which has such importance for our faith: "God said to Moses, 'I am who am.' And he said, 'Say this to the people of Israel, I AM has sent me to you'"** (Ex. 3:14).  
  
4. **Moses' faith is always in evidence, and at all stages he accepts what God tells him**. He is a humble man who does not overestimate his virtues and knows his limitations. For example, he was not a good speaker--in fact he had a stutter--and he could see it would be difficult for him to pass God's word on to his people or to inform Pharaoh as God required him. At first, he tries to decline God's calling and offers all kinds of excuses, to which God listens patiently, and then says, "***Who has made man's mouth? Who makes him dumb, or deaf, or seeing, or blind? Is it not I, the Lord? Now therefore go, and I will be your mouth and teach you what you shall speak***" (Ex. 4:11-12).  
  
5. Like his ancestor Abraham, **Moses puts his trust entirely in God**. He immediately leaves the peace and security of his home in Midian, where he had taken refuge, and returns to Egypt with the special mission of taking his suffering people away from that country and leading them into Canaan. The covenant which will be made on Sinai will make Israel God's own people.  
  
 **So, since making his promise to save man, God has taken two important steps--choosing first Abraham and then Moses**. The first he makes the father of a numerous people, and now, with Moses, he will turn that people into a special people of his own, by a singular choice. Before the Hebrews leave Egypt, Moses has a series of meetings with Pharaoh, as God had instructed him. In order to show Pharaoh that Yahweh is the only true God, much more powerful than Pharaoh, Moses warns him of a series of plagues which will befall Egypt if the Hebrews are not allowed to leave, but Pharaoh will not listen, despite the evidence.  
 Coinciding with the **announcement of the tenth and last plague**, that of the **death of the firstborn**, Moses instituted on God's instruction the feast of the **PASSOVER** as a permanent commemoration of the Jews' liberation from slavery in Egypt: "***This month shall be for you the beginning of months; it shall be the first month of the year for you. Tell all the congregation of Israel that on the tenth day of this month they shall take every man a lamb according to their fathers' houses, a lamb for a household....Your lamb shall be without blemish, a male a year old...and you shall keep it until the fourteenth day of this month....This day shall be for you a memorial day, and you shall keep it as a feast to the Lord; throughout your generation you shall observe it as an ordinance forever***" (Ex. 12:2-14).  
  
 After the **Passover meal**, with the permission previously given by Pharaoh--who had seen his own son die--the Israelites begin their journey into Sinai. Before reaching Sinai, indeed immediately after leaving Egypt, **God works a most spectacular miracle to enable his people to cross the Red Sea**. In terror, the Egyptians cry out, "Let us flee from before Israel, for the Lord fights for them against the Egyptians" (Ex. 14:25). The Red Sea can become passable through natural causes, but in this case, **God enables Moses to orchestrate natural phenomena in order to save the Israelites. The crossing of the Red Sea has always been seen by the Church as symbolizing Christian baptism. The history of Israel as a people really begins with their departure from Egypt. God molds the clans together to lead them toward their final destination--possession of the land of Canaan. The Israelites become his chosen instrument to effect his plan of salvation**.  
  
 In line with what he promised in Genesis, God now tells Moses, "***This you shall say to the house of Jacob....If you will obey my voice and keep my covenant, you shall be my own possession among all peoples***" (Ex. 19:3-5). God's choice of Israel, as that of Abraham, stems from his love and not from Israel's merits. The narrative begins by describing the impressive theophany which happens on Mount Sinai: "***And Mount Sinai was wrapped in smoke, because the Lord descended upon it in fire, and the smoke of it went up like the smoke of a kiln, and the whole mountain quaked greatly***" (Ex. 19:18). Here we can see God's infinite majesty and also his total transcendence. He is the Lord of all creation. He is all-holy, and therefore the people cannot approach the mountain because they are as yet unpurified.  
  
**The covenant of Sinai seems to have three purposes**:  
  
**1. It makes Israel the people of God and Yahweh the God of Israel--as Leviticus later reminds them, "I will be your God, and you shall be my people" (Lev. 26:12).  
  
2. God promises to give special help and protection to Israel against other nations and to give it a land of its own--Canaan.  
  
3. Finally, God gives Israel a Law to regulate its religious and moral life. The Decalogue will henceforth determine the relations of each individual and of Israel as a whole with God. This commitment to Israel is made more explicit in the "Book of the Covenant" which contains a whole series of laws and precepts which are to govern the religious and civil life of the chosen people.**

The covenant is ratified or signed by means of a sacrifice, and then the **people-**-***represented by the twelve tribes of Israel***--and the **altar**--***representing God***--are twice sprinkled with the blood of the sacrifice. "***Then he [Moses] took the book of the covenant and read it in the hearing of the people, and they said, 'All that the Lord has spoken we will do, and we will be obedient***'" (Ex. 24:7).  
  
 Although Exodus takes the form of a popular narrative, easy for a primitive people to understand, it also contains important religious teachings. The episodes in this history obviously involve special divine intervention. There is no other explanation for the liberation of Israel or the crossing of the Red Sea or the survival for so long in the wilderness.  
  
 **God chooses Moses as his faithful intermediary with his people, and Moses' response to his vocation and to the mission God gives him is a clear example of how people should make themselves available to God**.  
  
 A man of great humility and patience, Moses is put to the test on innumerable occasions. When Israel bemoans its plight, **Moses always responds faithfully to Yahweh and stays completely loyal to the covenant of Sinai. Yet he did not live to see the day when Israel entered the promised land, because on one occasion he doubted God's patience, thinking that God could not tolerate the Israelites' insolence and distrust.**  
  
 As the *book of Numbers* (20:1-12) reports, when Israel was in the middle of the desert at Meribah, there was no water. The people complained against Moses and Aaron, and God commanded them to give them water by striking a rock with Moses' rod. Because they had to strike the rock twice God punished Moses and Aaron for doubting his mercy, which is infinite despite his people's incredulity and disloyalty. And so the episode ends: "***These are the waters of Meribah, where the people of Israel contended with the Lord, and he showed himself holy among them***" (Num. 20:13).  
  
 Another piece of explicit teaching in this book is its revelation of *the name of Yahweh*, **the only God, absolute Lord and master**. God's covenant with the people of Israel, chosen without merit from all other peoples to be a holy people, a priestly nation, marks the beginning of salvation for the rest of humankind as well. **In a shadowy and symbolic way, everything said in this book points to its full development centuries later, in the New Testament, where it becomes flooded with light when the Messiah arrives**.  
  
 Seen from this angle, **we can glimpse in Exodus Jesus Christ, the ultimate goal of the Law and of all history. The passage of the Red Sea is seen as prefiguring baptism; the manna, the Eucharist; the bronze serpent lifted up on the pole (Num. 21:8-9), which cures the Israelites if they just look at it, becomes the cross of Jesus Christ, which has the power to heal or redeem man from all his sins; the rock which produces water in the desert is Jesus Christ, who nourishes Christians as they make their way through life (1 Cor. 10:4); the blood of the victims which is used to seal the old covenant is the blood of Jesus, who is immolated on the cross as an offering for our sins (Heb. 9:12). With his blood he seals the new and definitive covenant**.  
  
 **All of this means that Exodus is one of the most important books in the Old Testament; without meditating on and appraising it, it is difficult to understand God's later revelation to men in his Son Jesus Christ.**