

## 2 God's nation established (Exodus)

Genesis explained that the LORD God reigns over all (Genesis 1–11), but he chose to establish Israel as the nation that would restore the blessing of his reign to the nations (Genesis 12–50).

In Exodus we discover how God rescued Jacob's family from human control (Exodus 1–18), establishing them as the first nation restored to heaven's reign (Exodus 19–40).

Before we dive into Exodus, are there any questions from last time?



"Map 3" *Standard Bible Atlas* (Standard Publishing, 2006), 7.

### 2.1 God saves from oppression (Exodus 1–18)

God's goal is to restore the world into his sovereign authority. But human rulers claim power over everyone—even the descendants of Israel (Jacob) whom God called to be his nation.

Human rulers stay in power by killing their enemies, even little ones (Exodus 1:16). Baby Moses escapes death with help from the midwives (1:15), his mother (2:3), his sister (2:4), and Pharaoh's own daughter (2:5). In the opening chapters of Exodus, the women are the heroes.

Moses tries violence to overpower violence. That was Cain's strategy. It doesn't work. Moses flees to Midian where he starts a family and lives in exile: *a foreigner in a foreign land* (2:22).

#### ***I AM the LORD (Exodus 3–6)***

Moses is herding flocks for his father-in-law when he stumbles across *the mountain of God* (3:1). The heavenly sovereign sends his messenger to make Moses aware that God is in residence here. What appears to be *a flame in the bush* is actually *the angel of the LORD* (3:2). Here in the wilds, Moses has stumbled into God's palace. He needs to *remove his shoes* (3:5).

But if Moses is to be commissioned, he must know who is sending him. The sovereign of all the earth is not a mortal like Pharaoh (2:23). He's not like the Pharaoh who *forgot Joseph* (1:8). The true sovereign *remembers his covenant* with his people (2:24). He's the **I AM**—always was, always is, always will be—the ground of “being” for all things (3:14).

The **I AM** commissions Moses to lead his people out of Egypt, to serve the LORD instead of Pharaoh (3:16-21). But facing Pharaoh is a terrifying mission for a fugitive (4:1-17)! Moses needs to know that life and death are in God's hands, not Pharaoh's (4:18-26).

Moses returns to Egypt as the ambassador of another king, commissioned to tell Pharaoh to release the people who do not belong to him. The LORD's message is, “*Let my people go!*” (5:1; 7:16; 8:1, 20-21; 9:1, 13). Pharaoh does not recognize the LORD as their sovereign (5:2).

Did you notice we've been using “LORD” in block letters (small capitals)? In Hebrew, this is God's name: YHWH. The name comes from the verb “to be.” The Name declares God as the Being, like **I AM**, always-present with his people.

When Israel receives their unique relationship with God through the Sinai covenant, this is the Name God gives his people so they can call on him (20:2). The Name connects their identity with God's. They are his nation; he is the ever-present sovereign among his people:

#### **Exodus 29:45–46 (NIV)**

<sup>45</sup> Then I will dwell among the Israelites and be their God. <sup>46</sup> They will know that **I am the LORD their God**, who brought them out of Egypt so that I might dwell among them. **I am the LORD their God.**

Other nations could not call on the Name. When the Hebrew Scriptures were translated for other nations, they did not disclose God's Name. For YHWH, they substituted the Greek word *kyrios* meaning a *lord* or *master*. That's why our translations still use *the LORD*, with the small capitals indicating this is the sacred Name of God given to Israel in the Sinai covenant (6:2-8).

### **Plagues and Passover (Exodus 7–13)**

But how will Moses convince Pharaoh to let the LORD's people go to serve the LORD instead? Moses is not sent to fight Pharaoh. All he has to do is announce what the LORD will do. God will send **ten plagues** to demonstrate who is running the world. Hint: it's not Pharaoh. *Then you will know that I am the LORD* (6:7; 7:5, 17; 8:22; 10:2; 14:4, 18).

If God strikes the water, Egypt is in trouble (7:17). Pharaoh is powerless to protect Egypt from little invaders: frogs (8:2), gnats (8:16), and flies (8:21). Pharaoh cannot protect the livestock (9:2) or the people (9:9). Pharaoh cannot protect their crops from hail (9:18), locusts (10:4), or darkness (10:22). Pharaoh cannot protect the households of Egypt, not even his own (11:5).

Now the LORD asks the Hebrews to identify as his people. The LORD's aim was not to destroy Pharaoh or the Egyptians (9:15), merely to pressure them into letting the LORD's people go. But God does have authority over every household. The heir (firstborn) of every household will die, but God will **pass over** any household that recognizes his authority.

The way to identify as belonging to God was to celebrate the feast in the hope of liberation, and paint the evidence (the blood of the lamb or goat they ate) on their doorposts (12:11-14).

That night the Egyptians lost their heirs, and Pharaoh lost the will to resist God's authority. He told the Israelites to leave (12:31-33). 430 years after Jacob's family moved to Egypt, his descendants were freed to become the LORD's people (12:40-42).

**Important:** When God emancipated his people from slavery, they were not set free to serve themselves. Anarchy would end up in slavery to each other all over again. Every family now *belongs to the LORD* (13:2). With the Sinai covenant, they commit to serving the LORD.

## **Salvation from enslavement (Exodus 14–15)**

God is now leading Israel out of Egypt to be his people. They don't see God: just the radiant cloud around his presence, with them 24 hours a day. This *pillar of cloud* leads them in daylight, and lights up like a fire to lead them at night (13:21-22).

But the one thing power-hungry rulers cannot do is to let people go! Their power depends on having people in their grasp. Pharaoh sends his army to re-capture the escaping Hebrews, trapping them between the mountains and the Red Sea.

Pharaoh tries to follow, but God's way does not support Pharaoh's forces. His whole army dies, without a fight (14:28). With no army to recapture them, the Israelites are truly free. It's the forces of death give tyrants their power.

God's people break into a song. The first song in the Bible celebrates the God who saves:

### **Exodus 15:1–18 (NIV)**

<sup>1</sup> I will sing to the LORD, for he is highly exalted.  
Both horse and driver he has hurled into the sea.

<sup>2</sup> The LORD is my strength and my defence; he has become my **salvation**. ...

<sup>12</sup> "You stretch out your right hand, and the earth swallows your enemies.

<sup>13</sup> In your unfailing love you will lead the people you have **redeemed**.

In your strength you will guide them to your holy dwelling.

<sup>14</sup> The nations will hear and tremble ...

<sup>18</sup> The LORD **reigns** for ever and ever.

The song introduces the language of *salvation*, *redemption*, and God's *reign* (kingdom).

The Psalms keep celebrating these rescue themes (e.g. 66:6). When Babylon captures God's people, the prophets promise a new exodus (e.g. Isaiah 43:16-19; 51:10-11). The New Testament describes what Jesus achieved for us as *salvation*, *redemption*, and *kingdom of God*.

But rather than impose Christian theology on Exodus, let Exodus shape our theology. For some today, *salvation* means praying the prayer that says, "I am a sinner; please forgive me." It's presented as a free gift that requires no commitment to a church or anything. That's so foreign to the exodus story.

Nowhere in Exodus does God say, "The reason you're enslaved is your own personal sin. Just say the prayer and I will save you, so you can be your best self."

Centring the story on "me and my sin" fails to grasp the scope of what God is saving us from. The world was already a mess—already sold under sin—before I was born and contributed my bit. So, salvation can't just be personal forgiveness: God is liberating the world from the oppressive control of sin and death, restoring it into his reign.

Salvation doesn't come though saying, "I'm a bad person." It comes by recognizing the anointed leader (the Christ) who defeated the powers of sin and death when God made a way where there was no way (by raising him from the dead).

The declaration that saves is not, "I am a sinner," but "Jesus is Lord." *If you declare with your mouth, "Jesus is Lord," and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved* (Romans 10:9).

Salvation does not mean being released to be my best self; it means being emancipated to serve the king appointed by God to restore his just reign to the world (Romans 6:17-18).

That's how the Exodus story unfolds. The people emancipated from slavery are now led by the LORD.

## **A community under God (Exodus 16–18)**

In the wilderness, God's people still have their struggles. God provides for them: food to eat (Exodus 16), water to drink (17:1-7), and protection from enemies (17:8-13).

The new community still has disputes, so Moses appoints leaders to help ensure everyone is treated justly. This was essential for Moses's survival, but the suggested structure came from a Midianite priest rather than the LORD (Exodus 18).

Moses leads the people to the mountain where he met the LORD. As promised, their heavenly sovereign is in residence on the mountain. Here the people meet their new sovereign.

Your thoughts?

## **2.2 God saves into his sovereignty (Exodus 19–40)**

Moses has been God's spokesman to Pharaoh. Now he's God's spokesman to Israel:

### **Exodus 19:3–6 (NIV)**

<sup>3</sup>Then Moses went up to God, and the LORD called to him from the mountain and said, "This is what you are to say to the descendants of Jacob and what you are to tell the people of Israel: <sup>4</sup>'You yourselves have seen what I did to Egypt, and how I carried you on eagles' wings and brought you to myself.

<sup>5</sup>Now if you obey me fully and keep my **covenant**, then out of all nations you will be my treasured possession. Although **the whole earth** is mine, <sup>6</sup>you will be for me a **kingdom of priests** and a **holy nation**.' These are the words you are to speak to the Israelites."

*Priests* mediate between God and people: that is Israel's role to the nations. *Holy* means devoted: the nations need to see a nation living in devotion to the ruler of the whole earth.

The people were terrified to meet the LORD at Mount Sinai. (19:16; 20:18). God asks the people to commit to a covenant—a binding legal agreement that defines the relationship between God as sovereign and Israel as his nation. Exodus 20–23 sets out the terms of the covenant.

### **The Ten Commandments (Exodus 20)**

The initial covenant stipulations are summarized in "ten statements" (20:1-17):

1. No **allegiances** above the LORD.
2. No **images** to represent God. (Only people can image the living God.)
3. No abusing the LORD'S **name** (misusing the sovereign's authority).
4. **Rest** every Saturday, the whole community (people and animals).
5. **Honour** parents. (Give honour to those who gave you your life.)
6. No **murder**. (Do not take a person's life.)
7. No **adultery**. (Do not be unfaithful to your marriage partner.)
8. No **theft**. (Do not take what belongs to another.)
9. No **perjury**. (Do not destroy a neighbour's reputation.)
10. No **coveting**. (Do not desire what your neighbour has.)

Are the Ten Commandments binding laws that people of all nations must obey now that Christ has come? Many churches teach they are: Catholic, Anglican, Lutheran, ...

Alternatively, should we regard the Ten Commandments as the basic stipulations of God's covenant with Israel at Sinai, not as requirements placed on all nations in Christ's covenant?

How much of Israel's laws should be required of non-Jewish Christ-followers? That was a disputed topic in the early church. They met in Jerusalem to discuss this. They did not conclude, "You must all keep the Ten Commandments." Rather:

**Acts 15:28–29 (NIV)**

<sup>28</sup>It seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us not to burden you with anything beyond the following requirements: <sup>29</sup>You are to abstain from food sacrificed to idols, from blood, from the meat of strangled animals and from sexual immorality. You will do well to avoid these things.

This list is closer to what God required of all people in the Noah covenant (Genesis 9:4-6) than to God's commandments for the nation of Israel in the Sinai covenant.

So, do we treat the Ten Commandments as disposable? Not at all. Like all of Israel's laws, these laws reveal something about God, for God is not capricious. But instead of asking, "Do I have to obey these laws?" a better question might be, "How does the way God set up Israel as his nation reflect the character of our heavenly sovereign?"

***The covenant establishes Israel as a nation under God (Exodus 21–24)***

Before Israel commits to being God's people, the LORD provides the laws by which the nation will live. These are not God's original creational ideals. For example, God accommodates slavery, even though it's a curse (Genesis 9:25-27). So God merely limits how harsh people can be with their slaves (Exodus 21).

Unlike our laws today, these laws do not try to cover every possible contingency. They're just sample cases, such as what to do *if someone steals an ox or a sheep* (22:1). Israel's elders and judges were then expected to apply God's wisdom and justice for other cases too.

Now that the people have some idea of what it would look like to live as God's people, they're asked to commit to the covenant that establishes the nation of Israel as the first nation to live directly under the LORD'S sovereign authority:

**Exodus 24:7–8 (NIV)**

<sup>7</sup>Then he took the Book of the Covenant and read it to the people.

They responded, "We will do everything the LORD has said; we will obey."

<sup>8</sup>Moses then took the blood, sprinkled it on the people and said, "This is **the blood of the covenant** that the LORD has made with you in accordance with all these words."

The ceremony of sprinkling blood on the people set them apart as God's holy nation.

They now celebrate the covenant relationship between the heavenly sovereign and his nation by being invited into God's house on Mount Sinai, to share a meal with God. This has to be one of the most astounding passages in the Old Testament:

**Exodus 24:9–11 (NIV)**

<sup>9</sup>Moses and Aaron, Nadab and Abihu, and the seventy elders of Israel went up

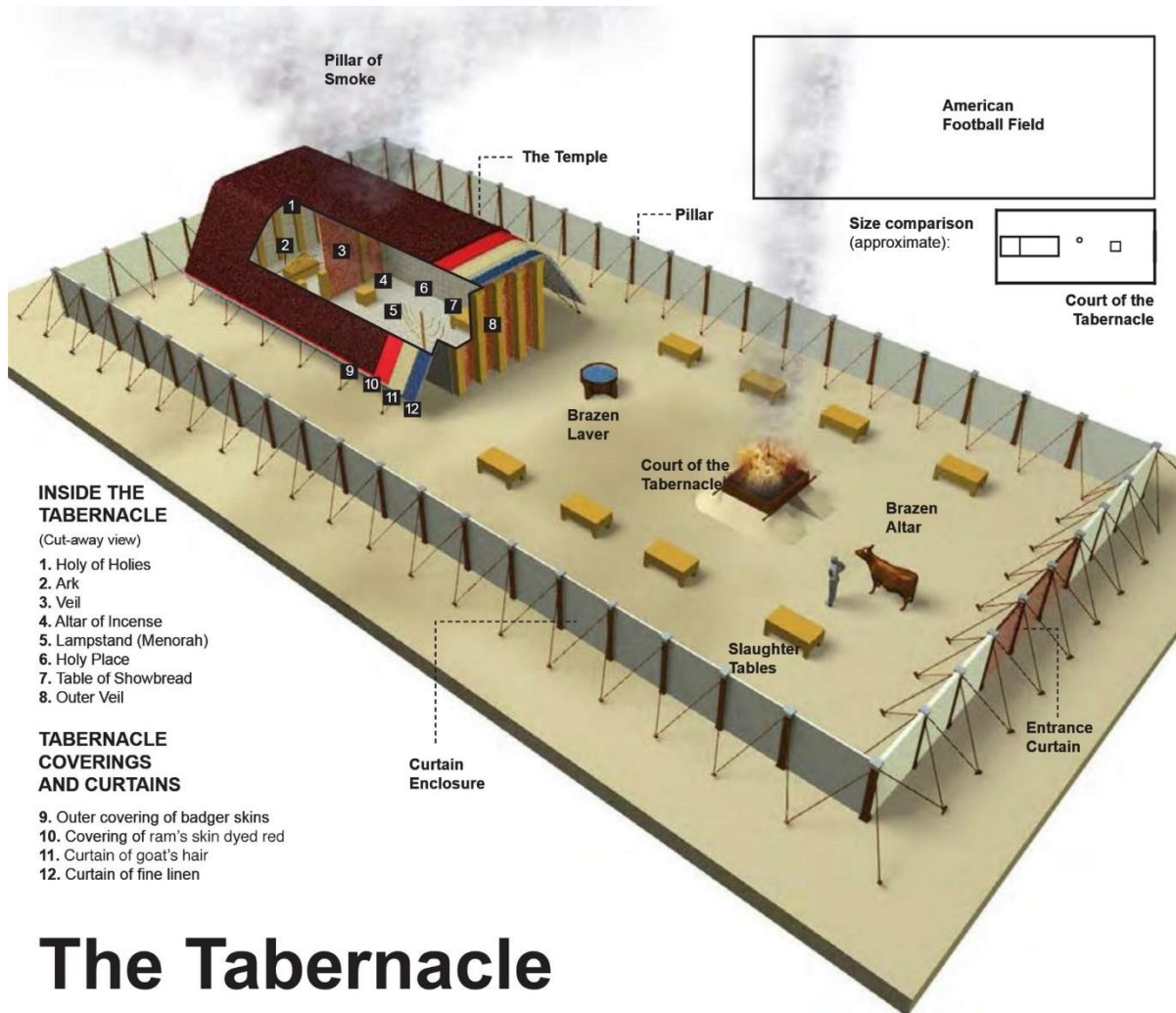
<sup>10</sup>and saw the God of Israel. Under his feet was something like a pavement made of lapis lazuli, as bright blue as the sky. <sup>11</sup>But God did not raise his hand against these leaders of the Israelites; **they saw God, and they ate and drank.**

*The blood of the covenant* is a phrase Jesus adapted at his last supper. He established *the new covenant in my blood* (Luke 22:20), celebrating the new covenant meal that promised the restoration of God's kingship (Mark 14:24-25). It's what Zechariah had promised when the king rode into Jerusalem on a donkey to restore God's reign to the world (Zechariah 9:9-13).

### A tent for God's throne (Exodus 25–27)

The LORD is now sovereign over the nation of Israel. If they want God to live among them and lead them, they should provide a tent for him (Exodus 25:8). The king guides them in how to build a tent suitable for his holy presence.

**Important:** do not think of this tabernacle (tent) as a church building. People did go inside to sing and listen to sermons. They weren't allowed in at all! It was a house for Israel's king.



# The Tabernacle

This portable temple was built in the wilderness by the Israelites circa 1450 BC after they were freed from Egyptian slavery. The tabernacle was the first temple dedicated to God and the first resting place of the ark of the covenant. It served as a place of worship and sacrifices during the Israelites' 40 years in the desert while conquering the land of Canaan.

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The tabernacle existed to house **the ark** (25:10). The ark was the **throne**—where the heavenly sovereign was seated *enthroned between the cherubim* (1 Samuel 4:4; 2 Samuel 6:2; 2 Kings 19:15; Psalms 80:1; 99:1; Isaiah 37:16). The *cherubim* were guards of the divine presence (Genesis 3:24), so Israel was to construct a pair of symbolic guards to stand beside the presence. Of course they were not to place any image on the throne to represent God.

The throne contained the law tablets that established the relationship between the heavenly sovereign and his nation. The lid of the ark represented the seat of God's authority, the interface between the LORD and his people: *where I will meet with you and give you all my commands for the Israelites* (25:22).

The courtyard separated the tent from the defiled world (27:9-19). Inside the tent was **holy space**, for the royal servants only. The king's chamber was a perfect cube, off-limits to everyone, the **most holy space**. (26:33).

The servants received special uniforms (Exodus 28). They were instructed on how to present their offerings in the service of their sovereign (Exodus 29). The furnishings for God's tent (Exodus 30) were made by craftsmen empowered with God's spirit (31:1-11).

Well, that's the house God asked them to build for him.  
Would you like to know what they actually did?

### ***Covenant violation and restoration (Exodus 32–34)***

Moses was away for several weeks, receiving these blueprints. The people were anxious to start the party, to celebrate their liberation from Pharaoh. But you can't start the party without the guest of honour. They needed something to represent the God who set them free.

What they'd seen the Egyptians do was cast an image to stand in for the god. They figured they needed a strong, young virile image to represent the LORD who pushed back Pharaoh's power, so they convinced Aaron (Moses' brother) to collect gold from the people and shape it into the image of ... a golden calf! (32:1-6)

This is a blatant violation of the first three commandments. They're no longer the unique people under God's leadership; they're just another nation who made up their own god. They're *corrupted*, unfit for purpose (32:7).

God is as rotable as a bridegroom who finds his partner in bed with someone else straight after the wedding. He's ready to call the whole thing off, to start again with the one person who wasn't party to the unfaithfulness (32:10). God would still be faithful to what he promised Jacob; it would just add a few hundred more years to his restoration project.

Moses takes the role of a mediator between the livid bridegroom and the unfaithful partner. God gives ground: he'll "divorce" his people, but they can still have the promised land (33:3).

Moses keeps interceding on the basis of God's faithful character. So, in the end, Israel's unfaithfulness reveals God's faithfulness. God shows himself to Moses. This what he reveals:

#### **Exodus 34:6–7 (NIV)**

<sup>6</sup>He passed in front of Moses, proclaiming, "The LORD, the LORD, the compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness, <sup>7</sup>maintaining love to thousands, and forgiving wickedness, rebellion and sin. Yet he does not leave the guilty unpunished; he punishes the children and their children for the sin of the parents to the third and fourth generation."

Scripture repeatedly relies on this revelation of God's faithfulness, e.g. Numbers 14:18; Nehemiah 9:17; Psalm 86:15; Daniel 9:9; Nahum 1:3.

Visiting the sins of the parents on future generations does not mean God is vindictive. My choices do affect my children and theirs for 3 or 4 generations. (Compare Ezekiel 18:20.)

God did not walk away when Israel's unfaithfulness broke the covenant. He restored it (34:10; 27-28). Everything depends on the faithfulness of God.

## **The covenant is back on (Exodus 35–40)**

Exodus 35–39 describes Israel building the tabernacle, following the instructions God gave in chapters 26–31. It feels like we're hearing it all over again, but the point is that Israel is actually doing what God asked them to do.

God isn't pushing his kingship on anyone. They're providing the space for God to live among them, inviting his leadership over them. As Psalm 22:3 says, the honour that his people give to the Holy One (the one devoted to them) enthrones his authority over them.

When the tent is completed and consecrated to him (39:32 – 40:33), the LORD moves in to take up residence among them and lead his people. As usual, they don't see God's face: just the cloud surrounding his holy presence:

### **Exodus 40:34–35 (NIV)**

<sup>34</sup> Then the cloud covered the tent of meeting, and the glory of the LORD filled the tabernacle. <sup>35</sup> Moses could not enter the tent of meeting because the cloud had settled on it, and the glory of the LORD filled the tabernacle.

God's nation is now led by the heavenly sovereign who lives among his people:

### **Exodus 40:36–38 (NIV)**

<sup>36</sup> In all the travels of the Israelites, whenever the cloud lifted from above the tabernacle, they would set out; <sup>37</sup> but if the cloud did not lift, they did not set out—until the day it lifted. <sup>38</sup> So the cloud of the LORD was over the tabernacle by day, and fire was in the cloud by night, in the sight of all the Israelites during all their travels.

In effect, it's like Eden restored—God's people, living on God's doorstep, serving him.

Well, that's the ideal anyway. There are plenty more bumps on the road before heaven's reign fully returns to earth so the whole earth becomes a temple for God, cleansed like an enormous cube of holy space the size of the known world (Revelation 21).<sup>2</sup>

## **2.3 Summary and significance**

What do you need to know from Exodus?

- Faithful to his promises to Abraham, God rescued Jacob's descendants from oppression under human rule, despite Pharaoh's unwillingness to release people. God knows how to save, even when there seems no way.
- The revelation of God is what saves. The whole point is: *so that you may know I am the LORD.*
- Salvation forms us into a community under God's leadership. God calls his people to commit to the covenant that recognizes him as sovereign.
- When we commit to God's covenant, he asks us for a dwelling place so he can live among us and lead us. God's presence among us defines us.

All of that shapes the salvation story that culminates in the Christ. He is the embodied revelation of the God who saves the world, establishing the new covenant that makes us a people under God, the foundation of the temple that is God dwelling in his people.

Any questions or thoughts for discussion?

In preparation for next week, please read Leviticus 19 and Joshua 24.

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<sup>2</sup> See G. K. Beale. *God Dwells among Us: A Biblical Theology of the Temple* (IVP Academic, 2021).