

Exodus



Moses and the Burning Bush (mosaic), 6th cent.
St. Catherine's Monastery, Mt. Sinai, Egypt.

with

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Exodus

Traditional Author: Moses
Traditional Date Written: 1446-1406 B.C.
Period Covered: 1446 B.C.

Introduction

In Genesis 12: 2-3, God chooses Abram, an anonymous and obscure man from Ur of the Chaldeans (modern-day southern Iraq), and he makes a promise to him:

*I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you;
I will make your name great, so that you will be a blessing.
I will bless those who bless you, and curse those who curse you;
All the families of the earth will find blessing in you.*

God chooses Abram to play a crucial role in the redemption of humanity, for it is through him that all the families of the earth will find blessing; it is through Abram that God creates a people who will be “a light for the nations” (Isaiah 42: 6) and through whom he will bring the Messiah, who takes away the sin of the world. Abram does nothing to merit being chosen for this role, but he responds to God’s call in faith, and as Paul tells us, his faith is “credited to him as righteousness” (Romans 4: 5). In Genesis, God makes good on his promise: Abraham and his wife Sarah give birth to Isaac; Isaac and his wife Rebekah give birth to Jacob; and Jacob and his wives give birth to twelve sons, who become the founders of the twelve tribes of Israel. When we leave Genesis, the twelve sons and their families—seventy people in all—have immigrated to Egypt to be with their brother Joseph, who has become a national leader, second only to Pharaoh. Genesis ends with the death of Joseph: “Joseph died at the age of a hundred and ten. He was embalmed and laid to rest in a coffin in Egypt” (Genesis 50: 26).

As we turn the page to Exodus, four hundred years flash by. The family of seventy has grown into a people of two million, and they have become slaves in Egypt. The turn of events is no historical fluke. In Genesis 15: 13, God tells Abram: “Know for certain that your descendants will reside as aliens in a land not their own, where they shall be enslaved and oppressed for four hundred years.” God’s decision to place his people in slavery has two purposes: first, it protects them from assimilating into the highly advanced Egyptian culture, allowing them to grow into a people with their own identity and reach critical mass as an incipient nation; and second, it creates the slate on which God will inscribe profound moral and ethical lessons that are crucial to the plan of redemption. In Exodus, God gives his people *Torah*, the Law, which is the basis for the

moral and ethical development of the entire human family. Torah is not simply a theoretical set of laws to ensure a just society: many other cultures had such laws; rather, it is God's comprehensive teaching, written in letters of light on the dark background of oppression and suffering. In Leviticus 19: 34, for example, God says: "You shall treat the alien who resides with you no differently than the native born among you; you shall love the alien as yourself; for you too were once aliens in the land of Egypt." The Israelites know what it is to be enslaved and mistreated, and they must never treat others in that way.

Exodus begins in the Hebrew language with, "[And] *these are the names of the sons of Israel . . .*"¹ Two things are important about this beginning. First, "[And] *these are the names . . .*" suggests that Exodus continues Genesis; it is the next chapter in an on-going story; it is not—from a literary perspective—a separate, independent book. The first words—" [And] *these are the names*"—is the Hebrew title of the book; "Exodus" is the title used by St. Jerome in his fifth-century A.D. Latin translation, and it is derived from the Greek words *ek*, meaning "out" and *hodos*, meaning "road." In Genesis, Jacob's family of seventy goes into Egypt, and in Exodus, a people of two million come out. Second, the Hebrew phrase *benay Israel* means literally "the sons of Israel."² Most modern translations render this phrase "the Israelites," missing the subtle distinction that the people who come out of Egypt are God's "sons" who must be taught by their father and who must grow in their relationship with him. Throughout the Torah (Genesis through Deuteronomy), God's covenant people are consistently called "the sons of Israel."

Historical Background

As with all the books of the Bible, it is important to view Exodus in its full historical, cultural and literary context. We are all familiar with the story of Moses and the Israelites' exodus from Egypt, but the story raises some important historical questions: Did the exodus really happen? When is the story set? And who was "Pharaoh"?

¹ The first word in the Hebrew text is "And" (the particle *waw*), suggesting a direct, unbroken continuation of the Genesis narrative.

² As Robert Alter points out in *The Five Books of Moses* (p. 307), the masculine plural form of the Hebrew *ben* (the word used here) also means "children," but it is clear here and in Genesis 46 that only the male offspring make up the seventy who emigrate to Egypt; hence the correct translation "sons." Nevertheless, the connotation of "children" suggests that the Israelites are in the early stage of their relationship with God and that they have much to learn as they "grow up."

Did the Exodus really happen?

There is no historical or archaeological evidence to suggest that the Israelites lived in Egypt in large numbers between 2,000–1,400 B.C., the period of the Patriarchs through the Exodus, certainly nothing approaching the epic story reported in Scripture. And there is no historical or archaeological evidence *whatsoever* to suggest that two million people left Egypt and wandered through the Sinai wilderness for forty years. Indeed, if two million people left Egypt and headed toward the land of Canaan walking ten abreast, they would form a line stretching 150 miles! Although archaeologists have found ample evidence of other people living in the Sinai who predated the Israelites, it is highly improbable that two million people could dwell in the Sinai without leaving a single pottery shard, Hebrew carving or trash heap.

Doubts about the Exodus, however, are not based primarily on the lack of historical or archaeological evidence in Egypt or in the Sinai; rather, they are based upon the study of settlement patterns in Israel itself, a field that has been probed much more deeply than the Exodus. Extensive surveys of ancient settlements in Israel make it clear that no great influx of people occurred between 1,500-1,000 B.C. It is not the lack of evidence for the Exodus, but the arrival in the land of Canaan that suggests that the Exodus was not a literal historical event, at least not on the scale of the biblical story. If two million people who lived in Egypt for 400 years suddenly flooded into Canaan, one would expect to find massive evidence to support the event (their dishes, pottery and tools, for example, would look very different from similar Canaanite items, as would their art work, architecture and building methods). In fact, there is not a shred of evidence to suggest a sudden population increase in Israel during this period.

Given Jewish oral tradition, it seems probable that there were some enslaved Israelites in Egypt who escaped and made their way into the land of Canaan, planting the seed of a growing tradition which developed over time as the Jewish people shaped their own national story. Indeed, the Pentateuch (Genesis through Revelation) did not reach its final form until post-exilic times (after the Babylonian captivity, 586-539 B.C., 1,000 years after the Exodus story).

Questioning the historicity of the Exodus in no way undermines Scripture or diminishes its message; rather, such questioning highlights the literary nature of the text, viewing the Exodus as a story of redemption, writ on a grand scale. Scripture encompasses a variety of literary genres: it is not simply an historical account, although historical events may rest at its foundation. Instead, Scripture is the story of God's interaction with humanity as viewed through the lens of a living faith tradition.

When is the story set?

There has been an enormous amount written on the date of the Exodus as it is described in our biblical narrative, but most writers sit in one of two camps: 1446 B.C. or

c. 1290 B.C. The argument for 1446 B.C. rests primarily on the text of 1 Kings 6: 1, which says:

In the four hundred and eightieth year after the Israelites went forth from the land of Egypt, in the fourth year of Solomon's reign over Israel in the month of Ziv (the second month), he began to build the house of the Lord.

Solomon's reign began at the death of his father, David, in 970 B.C.; the fourth year of Solomon's reign, then, was 966 B.C. Both of these dates are firmly fixed by internal dating in 1 & 2 Kings and by Assyrian chronological records independent of the Bible. If Solomon began building the temple "in the four hundred and eightieth year after the Israelites went forth from the land of Egypt," the Exodus took place in 1446 B.C.

This squares well with the timeframe that follows. If the Exodus occurred in 1446 B.C., then the Israelites, after spending forty years in the wilderness, began their conquest of Canaan in 1406 B.C. The Amarna Letters, over three hundred 14th-century B.C. clay tablets in the Akkadian language, refer to such an invasion by a people called the "Habiru." It also fits well with Judges 11: 26, which says:

Israel has dwelt in Heshbon and its villages, Aroer and its villages, and all the cities on the banks of the Arnon for three hundred years.

Adopting this time-frame places the Exodus in 1446 B.C., the conquest of Canaan between 1406 and 1380 B.C., the period of the Judges between 1380 and 1050 B.C., Saul's reign between 1050 and 1010 B.C., David's reign between 1010 and 970 B.C., and Solomon's reign between 970 and 930 B.C. We can be confident of Solomon's dates, so working backward we arrive at the others. All of this is internally consistent with events in the Bible, and it is also the traditional date of the Exodus in both Jewish and Christian writings.

The c. 1290 B.C. alternative rests on Exodus 1: 11, which says:

Accordingly, they set supervisors over the Israelites to oppress them with forced labor. Thus they had to build for Pharaoh the garrison cities of Pithom and Rameses.

Rameses was rebuilt over the ancient city of Zoan-Tanis under the Pharaoh Rameses II, who reigned from c. 1290 to 1224 B.C. In addition, there is much archaeological evidence for the destruction of numerous Canaanite cities in the thirteenth century, evidence that many scholars suggest reflects Joshua's campaigns. Accepting the 1290 B.C. date, however, means curtailing the period of the Judges by 150 to 200 years, for Solomon's dates (970-930 B.C.) are reasonably secure. It also means reading the 480 years of 1 Kings 6: 1 as a "round" number (12 generations of 40 years). This is highly unusual in 1 & 2 Kings, both of which give exact numbers for all the kings' reigns (e.g., Jeroboam "reigned for twenty-two years" (1 Kings 13:20), Abijah "reigned in Jerusalem three years" (1 Kings 15:2), Asa "reigned in Jerusalem forty-one years" (1 Kings 15:10),

and so on for thirty-nine kings. One could easily argue that the city of Rameses mentioned in Exodus 1: 11 is an updating by a scribe living centuries later, giving current names to places his audience otherwise would not know. This seems to happen in Genesis 47: 11—“Joseph settled his father and brothers and gave them a holding in Egypt on the pick of the land, in the region of Rameses, as Pharaoh had ordered.” Clearly, Joseph lived long before 1290-1224 B.C., the period of Rameses.

Although we shall adopt the 1446 B.C. date for our study of Scripture, I do not wish to oppose the c. 1290 B.C. option too vigorously, for much modern scholarship supports it, including the work of William F. Albright, perhaps the greatest biblical archaeologist of the twentieth century. From a literary perspective, however, 1446 B.C. is internally consistent with our narrative, so we shall use it as we study Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, Deuteronomy, Joshua, Judges, and Ruth and 1 & 2 Samuel. Once we hit 1 Kings, the disagreements vanish, for all the dates fall into line.

Who was “Pharaoh”?

This question, of course, depends upon our dating of the Exodus. If we accept the 1446 B.C. date, the Pharaoh of the oppression was Thutmose III (1482-1450 B.C.), and his son, Amunhotep II (1450-1425), was the target of the ten plagues.

A fascinating story supports this identification. During the 19th century in Egypt, archaeologists unearthed a large slab of red granite buried between the paws of the Sphinx. It recounts “A Divine Oracle through a Dream” to Tutmose IV, son of Amunhotep II, before he became Pharaoh (Tutmose IV reigned from 1425-1412). Here is part of the story:

One of these days it happened that the King's Son Thut-mose came on an excursion at noon time. Then he rested in the shadow of this great god. Sleep took hold of him, slumbering at the time when the sun was at its peak. He found the majesty of this august god speaking with his own mouth, as a father speaks to his son, saying: “See me, look at me, my son, Thut-mose! I am thy father, Harmakhis-Khepri-Re-Atum. I shall give thee my kingdom upon earth at the head of the living. Thou shalt wear the southern crown and the northern crown on the throne of Geb, the crown prince of the gods. Thine is the land in its length and its breadth, that which the Eye of the All-Lord illumines. Provisions are thine from the midst of the Two Lands and the great tribute of every foreign country.

(James B. Pritchard, ed., *Ancient Near Eastern Texts Relating to the Old Testament*, 3rd ed. with supplement. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1969, p. 449.)

We know from Exodus 12: 29 that “the Lord struck down all the firstborn in the land of Egypt, from the firstborn of Pharaoh [Amunhotep II, according to our 1446 dating] sitting

on his throne to the first born of the prisoner in the dungeon, as well as the firstborn of the animals.” If Tutmose IV were Amunhotep’s eldest son, and hence heir to the throne, it seems strange that a prophecy would predict that he would become Pharaoh (since he would in any case), and even stranger that the prophecy would be preserved between the paws of the Sphinx, not unlike an offering. Perhaps Tutmose was not Amunhotep’s eldest son and heir to the throne, but his older brother was. And perhaps his older brother died during the tenth plague recorded in Exodus 12: 29-30, allowing Tutmose IV to inherit the kingdom. This would certainly call for preserving a record of the fortuitous event as an offering of thanks to the gods.

If we hold to 1446 B.C. as the date of the Exodus, then the events recorded in the Bible take place during Egypt’s Eighteenth Dynasty: the Pharaoh of the persecution was Thutmose III (1482-1450 B.C.), and his son Amunhotep II (1450-1425 B.C.) was the Pharaoh of the Exodus. In addition, Moses must have been born 1526 B.C., eighty years before the Exodus (see Exodus 7: 7), making Tutmose I (1526-1508) the Pharaoh who ordered the drowning of the Hebrew babies. The princess who fished Moses out of the Nile (Exodus 2: 5-10) then would have been Princess Hatshepsut, who later became Queen Hatshepsut (1504-1482 B.C.).

If our 1446 B.C. date is valid, then it places the events of the book of Exodus squarely in Egypt’s New Kingdom period, and specifically within the Eighteenth Dynasty. In order to put all of this into perspective, here is how it fits in Egyptian history.

Note: The ancient Egyptians dated events to the particular year in the reign of a king or pharaoh (regnal dating). The Ptolemaic scholar, Manetho, sorted the kings into dynasties, a system still used today, along with ancient king lists, astronomical records and modern archaeological dating methods. The following chronology is, thus, approximate and is subject to revision.

Historic Period

Important Events

Pre-dynastic Period

Neolithic and Late Neolithic Periods

(5th-4th millennium B.C.)

Religion focuses on local gods in plant and animal form, along with various types of totemism (the worship of sacred objects).

Archaic Period

I-II Dynasty

3100-2686 B.C.

The forces of nature become personified; local deities become anthropomorphized; Pharaoh becomes the incarnation of the god, Horus, giving legitimacy and absolute authority to Pharaoh's rule.

Old Kingdom

III-VI Dynasty

2686-2181 B.C.

Theological system of *heliopolis* (sun worship) develops, as does the worship of the sun god, Ra. Pharaoh evolves into the son of Ra.

Construction of the great pyramids begins: the Step Pyramid of Zoser, the Great Pyramid of Khufu, and the Sphinx. Technology is highly developed: the Great Pyramid towers 481 feet; it contains over two million blocks of stone, many weighing over fifty tons; and its volume can contain the cathedrals of Florence, Milan, St. Peter's in Rome, and St. Paul's and Westminster Abbey in London—all at the same time. Yet, the joins between its blocks are nearly invisible, true to 1/50th of an inch, and the four corners of the structure are so perfectly aligned North, East, South and West, that errors on modern compasses can be corrected against them, even today.

1st Intermediate Period

VII-X Dynasty

2181-2133 B.C.

Concept of the *ba* (soul or psyche) develops, and along with it judgment after death. The worship of Osiris as god of the underworld emerges.

Middle Kingdom

XI –XII Dynasty

2133-1786 B.C.

The son god, *Ra*, merges with a minor Theban god, Amun. The cult of Amun-ra develops.

2nd Intermediate Period

XIII-XVII Dynasty

1786-1567

The XIII-XVII Dynasties saw over seventy kings in rapid succession, with an accompanying bloated bureaucracy. The weakening of a strong central government allows a group of Asiatic people from West Asia called the Hyksos (“rulers of foreign lands”) to invade Egypt and control it for nearly 100 years. The Hyksos introduced bronze-working, horse and chariot, and advanced weapons of war. **Joseph comes to power as “Prime Minister” during the Hyksos period.**

Period of the Exodus

New Kingdom

1567-1085 B.C.

XVIII-XX Dynasty

Amonhotep I drives out the Hyksos, unifies the state, and improves the economy.

Tutmose I (1526-1508) embarks on a strong expansionist strategy, reaching the 3rd cataract in the south and the Euphrates River in the north. **Following our biblical system of dating, it would be Tutmose I, a native Egyptian, who orders the drowning of the Hebrew babies.**

Queen Hatshepsut (1504-1482), following the brief reign of Tutmose II (1508-1504) becomes co-regent with Tutmose III, who is still a child. She reverses the expansionist policy. **In our dating, Hatshepsut would be the princess who fishes Moses out of the Nile.**

When **Tutmose III** (1482-1450) comes of age, he becomes very aggressive, expanding Egyptian territory to the 4th cataract. He also embarks on an aggressive building plan, erecting many impressive buildings, including Karnak, as part of his imperialistic policy. **In our dating, Tutmose III would be the Pharaoh of the oppression.**

Amunhotep II (1450-1425) continues his father's policies. **In our biblical dating, Amunhotep II would be the target of the ten plagues.** He is not killed at the Red Sea: Exodus 14: 28 says that "The water flowed back and covered the chariots and horsemen—the entire army of Pharaoh that had followed the Israelites into the sea." Interestingly, Amunhotep II's mummy was discovered in 1898 in the Valley of the Kings at Thebes.

His son, **Thutmose IV** (1425-1412), is the one referred to in "A Divine Oracle through a Dream" mentioned above.

Late Period

XXI-XXX Dynasty

1085-332 B.C.

Animals, once regarded as manifestations or symbols of the gods, become objects of veneration—especially the crocodile and the cat. (Perhaps this explains why the only mention of cats is in Baruch 6: 21, and it is negative.)

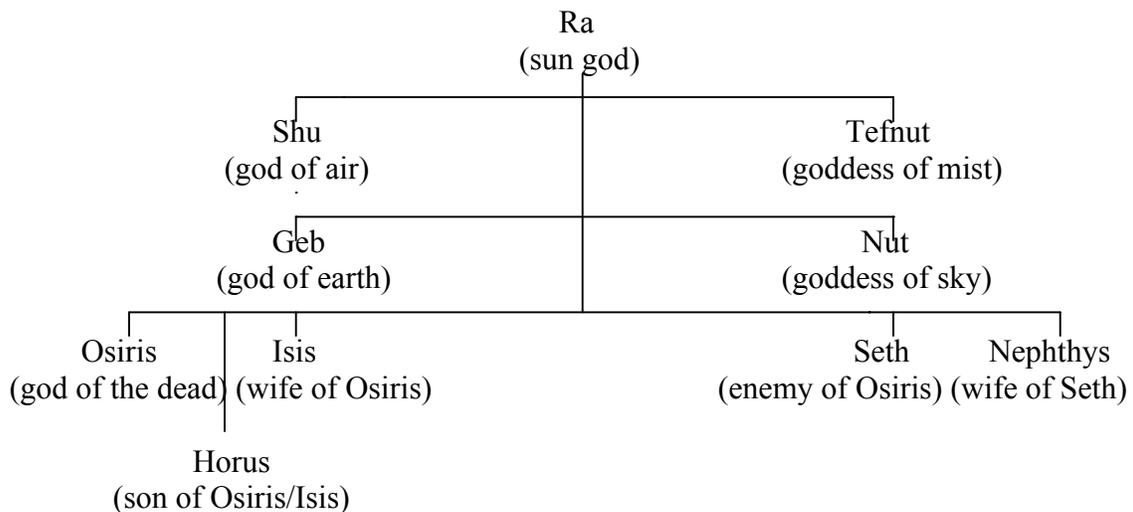
Hellenistic Period

The cult of Isis spreads outside of Egypt. Cleopatra commits suicide. Egypt becomes part of the Roman Empire under Caesar Augustus, as we approach New Testament times.

332-20 B.C.

This brief overview of Egyptian history suggests several things about the events recorded in the book of Exodus. First, the Israelites spent nearly half a millennium living in a very advanced and sophisticated society. We often have the impression that ancient societies were primitive and crude. The Egyptians built the pyramids one thousand years before the Exodus, and the pyramids are still architectural wonders today. They had a thriving economy, banking system and international trade; they had highly developed sciences of mathematics, medicine, astronomy and art. Ancient Egypt ruled its world for a thousand years before Moses came along, and it continued to rule its world for another thousand years after Moses and the Israelites left. At the time of Moses, Egypt was the most advanced civilization on the planet, with a very long and very impressive history.

Religion played a major role in ancient Egypt. At the time of Moses, Egypt had a fully developed, polytheistic religious system that included a pantheon of over eighty gods. Although difficult to generalize, the primary gods were related something like this:



As we shall see, Ra, Shu, Geb, Osiris, Isis and Horus—the left side of the family tree—play an important role in the Exodus story. At the time of Moses, this Egyptian pantheon had a history and theology as fully developed as Christianity is today.

At this stage we might ask ourselves: “What would happen to a foreign people who lived in such a society for nearly half a millennium—especially if they were enslaved, as the Israelites were?” Recall that when the Israelites entered Egypt, they were not a nation; they were just an extended family that had immigrated to a new land. In that land, over a period of more than four hundred years, they became a population of nearly two million people. During that time, they had no national or ethnic identity and no history to cling to. They did not have a single line of Scripture. True, God had made promises to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob way back in the time of the patriarchs, but then he seemingly fell silent. Between Genesis 50: 26 and Exodus 1: 1—over four centuries—God did not say a single word, as far as Scripture is concerned. Why did God put this rather ordinary, Semitic family in Egypt? Why did he allow them to become enslaved? And why did he fade into the background, seemingly abandoning them for almost half a millennium?

The prophet Habakkuk addresses a different set of circumstances at a different time and place, but what God says to Habakkuk might start us thinking here:

Habakkuk: *How long, O Lord, must I cry for help, and you do not listen?
Or cry out to you “Violence!” and you do not intervene?
Why do you let me see iniquity?
Why do you simply gaze at evil?
Destruction and violence are before me;
there is strife and discord.
This is why the law is numb and justice never comes.
For the wicked surround the just;
this is why justice comes forth perverted.*

The Lord: *Look over the nations and see!
Be utterly amazed!
For a work is being done in your days
that you would not believe, were it told!*

(Habakkuk 1:2-5)

The Plagues

Each time I teach Exodus I encounter the same questions about why God would devastate Egypt with plagues, why he chose those particular plagues, and whether they are portrayed as truly miraculous events or just natural phenomena. Understanding the plagues in Exodus lays the groundwork for understanding the nature and purpose of miracles throughout the Bible.

Why Plagues?

God brings the ten plagues on Egypt for three reasons. First, in the context of our narrative the ten plagues demonstrate to the Israelites who God is. Recall that the Israelites have been enslaved for nearly half a millennium, living as an oppressed minority in the greatest and most sophisticated polytheistic culture of their day. If anyone even remembered the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, it must have been as the faint echo from a folk tale, long forgotten. Even Moses knows little about God for he says to God: “But . . . if I go to the Israelites and say to them, ‘The God of your ancestors has sent me to you, and they ask me, ‘What is his name?’ what do I tell them?’” (Exodus 3: 13). God later replies: “[I have done these things that] you may recount to your son and grandson how I made a fool of the Egyptians and what signs I did among them, so that you may know that I am the Lord” (Exodus 10: 2).

Second, the ten plagues demonstrate to the Egyptians that the Lord is God, not the gods of the Egyptian pantheon. In doing so, God accomplishes the release of his people from Egyptian slavery. In Exodus 7: 3-5, God says:

Yet I will make Pharaoh so headstrong that, despite the many signs and wonders that I work in the land of Egypt, Pharaoh will not listen to you. Therefore I will lay my hand on Egypt and with mighty acts of judgment I will bring my armies, my people the Israelites, out of the land of Egypt. All Egyptians will know that I am the Lord, when I stretch out my hand against Egypt and bring the Israelites out of their midst.

The phrase “I will make Pharaoh so headstrong” is traditionally translated “I will harden Pharaoh’s heart,” which carries the agricultural sense of how an overly heavy yoke brings out the rebellious nature of the ox on which it is placed. The phrase does not mean that God will take the soft heart of Pharaoh and make it hard; rather, it suggests that God will apply pressure on Pharaoh to bring out of his heart what is already in it. Each plague increases the pressure, showing Pharaoh for who he is. In the end, Pharaoh capitulates to God, acknowledging him and freeing God’s people.

Third, the ten plagues bring judgment on the gods of Egypt. In the first commandment God gives his people he says, “You shall not have other gods beside me” (Exodus 20: 3). The second commandment compliments the first, “You shall not make for yourself an idol or a likeness of anything in the heavens above or on the earth below or in the waters beneath the earth” (Exodus 20: 4). The temptation to make gods of the

desires within us and of the objects around us poses a constant threat to genuine worship. The Egyptians vast pantheon of gods with their various symbols and iconography reflect a complex and highly developed theology. Nonetheless, God judges it in Exodus. In the ten plagues, God specifically targets major gods in the Egyptian pantheon, and he says: “I will go through Egypt striking down every firstborn in the land, human being and beast alike, and *executing judgment on all the gods of Egypt*” (Exodus 12: 12).

The ten plagues have such a stunning effect that not only does Pharaoh free the Israelites, but all the surrounding nations come to know that the Lord is God.

Did the Plagues Really Happen?

The ten plagues are first and foremost a major element in the plot structure of our Exodus narrative, the catalyst for Pharaoh freeing the Israelites. The *historicity* of the plagues is an issue independent of our narrative. There are three positions one can take concerning the historicity of the plagues, however. First, one can view the plagues as simply a literary device in the story, miracles wrought by God to drive the narrative forward in a dramatic fashion. Most academic biblical scholars hold this position.

Second, one can argue that the plagues did indeed happen, but they were mere natural occurrences, albeit intensified, that were given a theological interpretation by later Israelite generations. Much Jewish and Christian scholarship takes this position, outlining the events as follows:

- *June*: The Nile becomes stagnant and red with microscopic organisms.
- *July*: Frogs abound after the inundation of the Nile.
- *Hot summer and damp autumn months*: Lice, flies, murrain and boils.
- *January*: Hail and rain. (This date is suggested by the crops mentioned.)
- *February*: Appearance of locusts over green crops in early spring.
- *March*: Darkness from great sandstorms.
- *April*: Death of the firstborn, dated by the Passover celebration.

(Flinders Petrie. *Egypt and Israel*. New York: E.S. Gorham, 1911. pp. 35-36.)

Third, one can view each of the plagues as literal historical events, separate and distinct acts of God, miracles used accomplish God’s purpose. Although similar plagues did occur in Egypt at numerous times in history, the plagues recounted in Exodus far exceed natural events. Joseph P. Free lists five unique aspects of the plagues that set them apart as miraculous:

- 1) They are greatly intensified;
- 2) Moses predicts the beginning and ending of each plague precisely;
- 3) Some of the plagues affect only the Egyptians and not the Israelites;

- 4) There is a gradual severity to the plagues, culminating in the death of the first born; and
- 5) Each plague carries with it a moral purpose

(Archaeology and Bible History. Wheaton: Van Kampen Press, 1950, p. 95.)

Regardless of the position one takes on the historicity of the plagues, the Exodus *story* clearly treats them as miraculous events wrought by God to accomplish his divine purpose. Since we are approaching Exodus as a literary work and not as an historical document, we will take the ten plagues at face value and examine their nature and purpose within the context of our story.

What Is the Nature and Purpose of Each Plague?

Plague #1: The River of Blood (7: 14-24)

The Nile River begins in the 16,000 foot mountains in the heart of Africa, and it flows north toward the Mediterranean Sea. Its 4,000-mile course makes it the longest river in the world. Each year during spring and early summer the melting snow and heavy rain in the southern mountains bring a vast torrent downstream, laden with tons of fine silt that is deposited on the banks of the Nile in Egypt. This annual inundation creates one of the most fertile regions in the world. Without the Nile, Egypt would be as barren and dry as the great deserts that lie on either side of it.

The Nile is thus the source of life for Egypt, and it was considered sacred by the ancient Egyptians. Not only did the economy of Egypt depend upon the Nile, so did the happiness and wellbeing of its people. A poem from the New Kingdom Period (c.1567-1085 B.C., the time of Moses) suggests something of the importance of the Nile River to the Egyptian people:

Hail to thee, O Nile that issues from the earth and comes to keep Egypt alive! ...He who makes barley and brings emmer into being, that he may make the temples festive. If he is sluggish, then nostrils are stopped up, and everybody is poor. If there be thus a cutting down in the food-offerings of the gods, then a million men perish among mortals... When he rises, then the land is in jubilation, then every belly is in joy, every back bone takes on laughter, and every tooth is exposed.

(ANET. "Hymn to the Nile." p. 372.)

Several gods were associated with the Nile. **Khnum** was the guardian of the source of the Nile, as well as being the creator of man; **Hapi** was the spirit of the Nile and its divine essence; and **Osiris**, the god of the underworld, had the Nile as his very bloodstream. It was Osiris who embodied the power of chthonic fertility, the force that is active in the earth and that causes corn and trees to grow from it. How ironic, then, that the first

plague turns the Nile into blood bringing death, not life: “The fish in the Nile died, and the Nile itself stank so that the Egyptians could not drink water from it. There was blood throughout the land of Egypt” (Exodus 7: 21). In turning the Nile to blood, God eloquently proves Khnum, Hapi and Osiris impotent, and in a stunning reversal he brings death from the very source of life.

Plague 2: The Frogs (7: 25 - 8: 11)

The plague of frogs carries a strong comic element. God says:

Let my people go to serve me. If you refuse to let them go, I will send a plague of frogs over all your territory. The Nile will teem with frogs. They will come up and enter into your palace and into your bedroom and onto your bed, into the houses of your servants, too, and among your people, even into your ovens and your kneading bowls. The frogs will come up over you and your people and all your servants.

(Exodus 7: 26-29)

Frogs were common in the marshlands of Egypt, and Egyptian art is filled with them. The ancient Egyptian word for frog was *qrr* (pronounced *krur*, the sound that a frog makes). It is onomatopoeic; that is, it sounds like what it is.

The inundation of the Nile continued through mid-September, and by mid-December it returned to its normal channel, leaving behind numerous pools and ponds, the breeding ground for frogs. One can imagine the chorus of croaks on a balmy Egyptian evening. To farmers, this was sweet music, for the gods of the Nile had finished their work, making the land fertile and new.

Such associations caused the Egyptians to deify the frog and to depict its theophany as the goddess **Heket**, who had the body of a woman and the head of a frog. Heket was the wife of **Khnum**, the guardian of the source of the Nile and the creator of man, and as an adjunct to her husband she served as a divine midwife, helping women in childbirth.

When God initiates the second plague, frogs are everywhere! Imagine waking up in the morning and having hundreds of frogs in your bedroom, on your bed and in your dresser drawers. Since frogs were sacred, the people could do nothing but bear their presence. This is a very funny scene. Louis Untermeyer, however, paints a picture that moves from comedy to horror:

Small green peepers, no larger than locusts, distended toads, the color of excrement. Mottled frogs like bloated vegetation, frogs that were lumps of bronze, frogs with eyes of unblinking demons, frogs subtler than salamanders, frogs motionless, frogs that leaped into the laps of

screaming children, wart-breeding frogs, frogs like droppings of mud, frogs trailing their slime after them, flying frogs that built nests in high reeds, frogs that died and bred death.

(Moses. New York: Harcourt and Brace, 1928, p. 184.)

And, indeed, God shifts the scene from comedy to horror himself:

After Moses and Aaron left Pharaoh's presence, Moses cried out to the Lord on account of the frogs he had inflicted on Pharaoh; and the Lord did as Moses asked. The frogs died off in the houses, the courtyards and the fields. Heaps of them were piled up, and the land stank.

(Exodus 8: 8-10)

Once again, the sacred Nile becomes the source of death, not life, and the goddess Heket is humbled.

Plague #3: The Gnats (8: 12-15)

The plague of gnats comes without warning, and it is the direct result of Moses and Aaron's actions: "Then the Lord spoke to Moses, 'Tell Aaron, stretch out your staff and strike the dust of the earth, and it will turn into gnats throughout the land of Egypt'" (Exodus 8: 12). The Hebrew word for "gnats" only occurs in Exodus 8: 12-15 and in the retelling of this event in Psalm 105: 31. It is difficult, therefore, to tell exactly what the insects were. The King James Version of the Bible, *Peshitta*, Josephus, the *Targum of Onkelos*, and the *JPS Torah Commentary* favor "lice"; while the Septuagint, Philo, Origen, Gesenius and the *Catholic Study Bible* (NAB) favor "gnats."

However one translates the Hebrew word, after Aaron strikes the ground, we can be sure that thick clouds of the nasty creatures infest the land, crawling into the eyes, noses and mouths of men and beasts alike: as the dust covers the ground, so do the insects swarm the air.

The plague targets the Egyptian god **Geb**, the god of the earth, and the father of Osiris and Isis. Geb was credited with the health and plenty of Egypt's annual crops. In the plague of gnats, rather than lush crops emerging from the earth, thick swarms of disease-bearing insects rise from the dust to torment the people.

Plague #4: The Flies (8: 16-28)

Unlike the third plague, the fourth plague comes with warning. Moses confronts Pharaoh at the Nile and says, "This is what the Lord says: 'Let my people go to serve me. For if you do not let my people go, I will send swarms of flies upon you and your

servants and your people and your houses. The houses of the Egyptians and the very ground on which they stand will be filled with swarms of flies.” (Exodus 8: 16-19). The Hebrew is literally “swarms,” without reference to what is swarming. Most translations add a preposition and the object of the preposition, such as “swarms *of flies*” or “swarms *of beetles*.” In Egypt, the beetle *blatta orientalis*, which gnaws clothes, furniture, plants, man and beasts, arrives in late November — the approximate time of this plague — and the Egyptian word bears a close resemblance to the Hebrew. Since each plague becomes more severe, each targets an Egyptian god, and each carries a moral lesson, one can make a strong argument for “swarm *of beetles*,” or, more specifically, scarabs.

The scarab was sacred to the Egyptians, and the tombs of the pharaohs are littered with them. The scarab was identified with the sun god Ra, and it embodied the principle of eternal life. Scarabs typically laid eggs in dung and rotting filth, and as the heat of the day warmed the putrid mass, scarabs would emerge — a symbol, as it were, of life emerging from death.

This plague is so severe that it causes Pharaoh to strike a compromise with Moses, promising him that if the plague ends the Israelites may worship their God (a promise he later breaks). Notice that the plague affects only the Egyptians; the Israelites are spared the infestation.

Plague #5: the Pestilence (9: 1-7)

Like the fourth plague, Moses specifically predicts the fifth, and like the fourth, it affects only the Egyptians. God says:

Let my people go to serve me. For if you refuse to let them go and persist in holding them, the hand of the Lord will strike your livestock in the field—your horses, donkeys, camels, herds and flocks—with a very severe pestilence. But the Lord will distinguish between the livestock of Israel and that of Egypt, so that nothing belonging to the Israelites will die.

(Exodus 9: 1-4).

The Hebrew word for this plague is variously translated “pestilence,” “murrain” or “anthrax.” Whatever the nature of the pestilence, it was highly contagious and deadly, affecting all of the Egyptian livestock.

Livestock, of course, was very important to the Egyptians, providing food, labor and transportation. We read in Genesis 47: 6, 17, for instance, that Pharaoh himself kept large herds and flocks. The economic devastation caused by the fifth plague would have been catastrophic. In addition, the Egyptians considered cattle sacred, especially the bull, **Apis**. On November 13, 1856 a spectacular discovery was made in the ruins of Memphis. At the end of a 1,120-foot tunnel, archaeologists discovered 64 large burial chambers, each with a huge red or black sarcophagus approximately 12 feet long, 9 feet high and 6 feet wide, weighing nearly 60 tons apiece. In each sarcophagus a sacred Apis

bull had been mummified and buried, illustrating the importance of Apis in the Egyptian pantheon of gods.

Plague #6: the Plague of Boils (9: 8-12)

In the sixth plague, God says to Moses and Aaron, “Each of you take handfuls of soot from a kiln, and in the presence of Pharaoh let Moses scatter it toward the sky. It will turn into a fine dust over the whole land of Egypt and cause festering boils on human being and beast alike throughout the land of Egypt” (Exodus 9: 8-9). The Hebrew word for “boils” is used only thirteen times in the Old Testament. The severity of the plague is reflected in verse 9, where it is said that “festering boils” will break out on “human being and beast alike.” The word “festering” refers to puss-filled, running sores.

The sixth plague produces a vile, leprous-like skin condition that is both painful and repulsive. While it did not produce death, it did incapacitate the priests of the Egyptian pantheon. An Egyptian priest had to be without physical defect, circumcised, shaved clean of all body hair, bathed and dressed in white, fine-twinned Egyptian linen. A priest covered with repulsive running sores could not serve the gods. In addition, the goddess **Sekhmet**, who was believed to have the power of both creating epidemics and ending them, was proven impotent as the plague raged on, affecting even her own group of priests called the *Sunu*.

Plague #7: the Plague of Hail (9: 13-35)

In the seventh plague, God says to Pharaoh: “Will you continue to set yourself against my people and not let them go? At this time tomorrow, therefore, I am going to rain down such fierce hail as there has never been in Egypt from the day it was founded up to the present” (Exodus 9: 17-18). And what a hail storm it was! The Lord said to Moses:

“Stretch out your hand toward the sky, that hail may fall upon the entire land of Egypt, on human being and beast alike and all the vegetation of the fields in the land of Egypt. So Moses stretched out his staff toward the sky, and the Lord sent forth peals of thunder and hail. Lightning flashed toward the earth . . . it struck down all the vegetation of the fields and splintered every tree in the fields. Only in the land of Goshen, where the Israelites were, was there no hail.

(Exodus 9: 22-26).

The plague of hail devastates what remains of the Egyptian economy, breaking down the crops and burning the fields as lightning races along the ground. In addition, the gods are once again impotent. **Nut** is the goddess of the sky who brings the blessings of the sun to the crops. One can only imagine the anguish and desperation as thousands of people lift their voices to Nut in prayer, and the prayers go unheard.

Plague #8: the Plague of Locusts (10: 1-20)

Locusts were the scourge of the ancient world. In the 9th century B.C., the prophet Joel says:

Listen to this, you elders! Pay attention, all who live in the land. Has anything like this ever happened in your lifetime or in the lifetime of your ancestors? Report it to your children, and their children to the next generation. What the cutter left, the swarming locust has devoured; what the swarming locust left, the hopper has devoured; what the hopper has left, the consuming locust has devoured.

(Joel 1:2-4)

In 1881, official documents from the island of Cyprus report that the government destroyed 1,300 tons of locust eggs, and in 1889 the government reported a swarm of locusts crossing the Red Sea that blanketed 2,000 square miles. In more recent times, African migratory locusts were spotted in 1926 and 1927 covering an area of 50 x 150 miles on the plains of the Niger River near Timbuktu. By 1930, they covered the whole of West Africa, and by 1932 they had reached Khartoum, more than 2,000 miles to the east of Timbuktu. By the time the plague sputtered out fourteen years later, it had affected 5,000,000 square miles of Africa, an area nearly double the size of the United States.

The devastation brought by locusts is hard to imagine. One square mile of a swarm contains from 100,000,000 to 200,000,000 locusts, and swarms typically cover as much as 400 square miles. Each locust eats its own body weight daily, and they strip a country bare, leaving millions of people in famine for years.

Pharaoh must have been seized with terror when God says:

How long will you refuse to submit to me? Let my people go to serve me. For if you refuse to let them go, tomorrow I will bring locusts into your territory. They will cover the surface of the earth, so that the earth itself will not be visible. They will eat up the remnant you saved undamaged from the hail, as well as the trees that are growing in your fields. They will fill your houses and the houses of your servants and of all the Egyptians—something your parents nor your grandparents have not seen from the day they appeared on this soil until today.

(Exodus 10:3-6).

The cumulative force of the plagues has had a devastating effect on Egypt, its people and its economy: the land lies buried beneath a putrid mass of decaying fish and frogs; the livestock have been felled by anthrax; the crops have been destroyed by hail; disease and infections have ravaged the people—and now Egypt faces an onslaught of locusts.

Pharaoh's officials hardly exaggerate when they cry out to him, "Do you not yet realize that Egypt is being destroyed?" (Exodus 10: 7).

Nevertheless, Pharaoh refuses to let the Israelites go, and when God brings the locusts, they accomplish their task: "Nothing green was left on any tree or plant in the fields throughout the land of Egypt" (Exodus 10: 15). The Egyptian gods are once again powerless against the hand of the Lord.

Plague #9: the Plague of Darkness (10: 21-29)

The plague of darkness strikes at the very heart of Egyptian worship, and it humbles the greatest of the Egyptian gods, **Ra**. The sun god Ra was considered one of Egypt's greatest blessings, bringing light and warmth to the land, regulating the days and the seasons, his faithfulness never-failing. The "Hymn to the Sun" captures something of the significance of Ra to the ancient Egyptians:

Hail to thee, beautiful Ra of every day, who rises at dawn without ceasing, Khepri wearying [himself] with labor! Thy rays are in [one's] face, without one knowing it. Fine gold is not like the radiance of thee. Thou who hast constructed thyself, thou didst fashion thy body, a shaper who was [himself] not shaped; unique in his nature, passing eternity, the distant one, under whose guidance are millions of ways, just as thy radiance is like the radiance of heaven and thy color glistens more than its surface.

When thou crossest the sky, all faces behold thee, [but] when thou departest, thou art hidden from their faces. Thou presentest thyself daily at dawn. A brief day—and thou racest a course of millions and hundred-thousands of leagues. Every day under thee is an instant, and when it passes, thou settest. So also thou hast completed the hours of the night: thou hast regulated it without a pause coming in thy labors.

(ANET, pp. 367-368)

The ninth plague, like the third and the sixth, comes without warning. When Moses stretches his hand toward heaven, a darkness so thick it can be felt descends upon Egypt, and it remains for three days. At the same time, the places where the Israelites live are not affected by the darkness.

Still, Pharaoh refuses to bend. As the severity of each plague intensifies, Pharaoh's heart grows harder, his will more stubborn. His disbelief turns to fear and loathing as his true character emerges. Instead of unlocking the shackles of slavery, Pharaoh summons Moses and commands: "Leave me, and see to it that you do not see my face again! For the day you do see my face you will die!" And Moses replies with equal resolve: "You are right! I will never see your face again" (Exodus 10: 28-29).

Plague #10: the Death of the Firstborn (11:1 - 12:30)

The death of the firstborn breaks Pharaoh's will, wins Israel's freedom and vanquishes the gods of Egypt. When the death angel passes through the night, slaying the firstborn of men and beasts, no question remains concerning who the Lord God is: as he says in Isaiah 44: 6—"I am the first; I am the last; there is no God but me."

The tenth plague strikes horror into the heart of every reader of Scripture:

And so at midnight the Lord struck down every the firstborn in the land of Egypt, from the firstborn of Pharaoh sitting on his throne to the firstborn of the prisoner sitting in the dungeon, as well as all the firstborn of the animals. Pharaoh arose in the night, he and all his servants and all the Egyptians; there was loud wailing throughout Egypt, for there was not a house without its dead.

(Exodus 12: 29-30)

One can only imagine the confusion and chaos that reigned throughout Egypt that night. The sound of wailing spread from house to house and hot tears dampened the floors of palace and hovel alike. In the home of Pharaoh the prince—the heir to the throne, the god-child—lay on his bed cold, lifeless and limp.

In the face of death, Pharaoh summons Moses and Aaron and pleads: "Leave my people at once, you and the Israelites! Go, and serve the Lord as you said. Take your flocks, too, and your herds, as you said, and go; and bless me, too!" (Exodus 12: 31-32).

The Israelites move quickly. The dough they had formed had not yet been leavened, so they carried it on their shoulders in kneading troughs wrapped in cloth. On the way out of town they plunder the Egyptians and leave Egypt: 600,000 men on foot, besides women, children and the elderly (Exodus 12: 37).

God's sovereign will prevails. In Genesis 15: 13-14, God tells Abraham, half a millennium before the Exodus: "Know for certain that your descendants will reside as aliens in a land not their own, where they shall be enslaved and oppressed for four hundred years. But I will bring judgment on the nation they must serve, and after this they will go out with great wealth."

On the night of Passover, 1446 B.C., God keeps his word.

The Covenant Reaffirmed

In Genesis 12: 2-3, God makes a covenant with Abram in which he says:

*I will make you a great nation
and I will bless you;
I will make your name great,
so that you will be a blessing.
I will bless those who bless you
and curse those who curse you;
All the families of the earth will find blessing in you.*

Implicit in this covenant is property and progeny. In Genesis 13: 14-17, God says to Abram:

Look about you, and from where you are gaze to the north and south, east and west; all the land that you see I will give to you and your descendants forever. I will make your descendants like the dust of the earth; if anyone could count the dust of the earth, your descendants too might be counted. Get up and walk through the land, its length and its breadth of the land, for I give it to you.

When God moves his people out of Egypt and into the Sinai wilderness, he reaffirms the covenant he made with Abram over half a millennium earlier. In Exodus 19: 4-6, God gathers his people at Mt. Sinai and he says:

You have seen how I treated the Egyptians and how I carried you on eagle's wings and brought you to myself. Now, if you obey me completely and keep my covenant, you shall be my treasured possession among all peoples, though all the earth is mine. You will be to me a kingdom of priests, a holy nation.

And the people reply in 19: 8: "Everything the Lord has said, we will do."

With this reaffirmation, God gives his people two great gifts: 1) the Law and 2) the Tabernacle.

The Law

In Exodus 20, God gives the Ten Commandments, ten principles by which a covenant people is to live with a holy God and one another. Notice that the first four commandments have to do with the peoples' relationship with God:

- 1) You shall not have other gods beside me (20: 3)
- 2) You shall not make for yourself an idol or a likeness of anything in the heavens above or on the earth below or in the waters beneath the earth; you shall not bow down before them or serve them (20: 4)
- 3) You shall not invoke the name of the Lord, your God, in vain (20: 7)
- 4) Remember the Sabbath day—keep it holy (20: 8)

And the last six commandments have to do with the peoples' relationship with each other:

- 5) Honor your father and your mother (20: 12)
- 6) You shall not kill (20: 13)
- 7) You shall not commit adultery (20: 14)
- 8) You shall not steal (20: 15)
- 9) You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor (20: 16)
- 10) You shall not covet (20: 17)

In chapters 21-23, God then shows his people how to apply these principles in everyday life. These principles—and their applications—provide the moral and ethical underpinnings for the rest of the narrative that follows, not only in Exodus, but throughout Scripture.

Let me offer one example of how the Commandments are applied. In Exodus 20: 13, God says, “You shall not kill.” The Hebrew word for “kill” is *ratsah*, which refers specifically to the premeditated, unlawful taking of a human life, more accurately translated: “You shall not *murder*.” It does not refer to killing in war or to judicial killing, which God clearly permits—indeed, commands—in Scripture. God carefully defines his prohibition against murder in 21:12-14:

Anyone who strikes someone a mortal blow must be put to death. However, regarding the one who did not hunt another down, but God caused death to happen by his hand, [if it is an accident] I will set apart for you a place to which that one may flee [a city of refuge, described later in Numbers 35:6-34]. But when someone kills a neighbor after maliciously scheming to do so, you must take him even from my altar and put him to death.

When Jesus addresses the issue of murder in the Sermon on the Mount, he says: “You have heard that it was said to your ancestors, ‘Do shall not kill [murder], and anyone who kills [murders] will be liable to judgment.’ But I say to you, whoever is angry with his brother will be liable to judgment” (Matthew 5:21-22). Obviously, Jesus is not equating anger with murder and commanding his followers not to be angry: he himself was angry on many occasions, notably when he entered the temple with a whip and drove the money changers out and when he excoriates the religious leaders at the temple in Matthew 23. Rather, Jesus recognizes that murder is the final step in a sequence of actions that begins

with anger and ends with the premeditated murder of another human being. When one feels the type of anger that congeals into hatred and manifests itself in a plot to take another's life, address the problem at the start: such anger must be nipped in the bud. As we study Scripture systematically from Genesis through Revelation, we will find this commandment—and the other nine—clarified and applied in like manner in a variety of circumstances.

The application of the Ten Commandments became the subject of profound rabbinical thought, and by the twelfth-century A.D. the great rabbi, Maimonides, had written *Sepher Mitzveth*, which identified 613 specific laws that emerged from the Commandments which would aid in their application. John H. Sailhamer's appendix in *The Pentateuch as Narrative* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan Publishing House, 1992) lists the 613 laws, and he notes where Jesus and the New Testament writers take up or assume the same principles. Sailhamer's appendix, by the way, draws heavily on Aaron L. Katchen's *Christian Hebraists and Dutch Rabbis: Seventeenth Century Apologetics and the Study of Maimonides' Mishneh Torah* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1985).

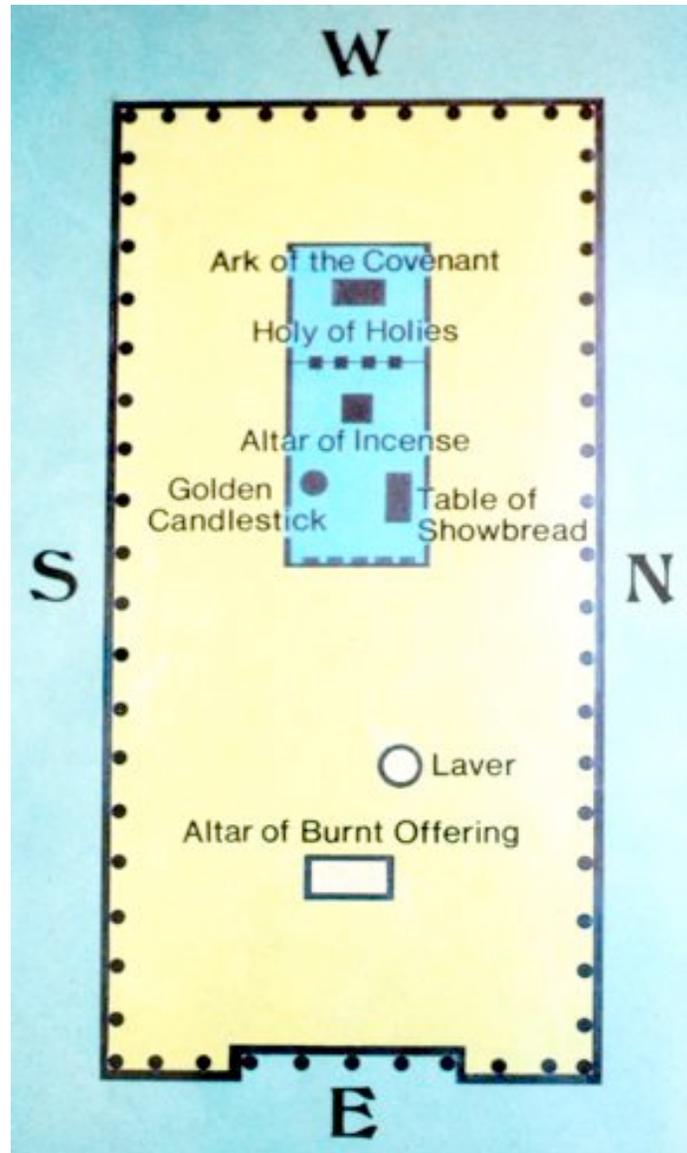
In rabbinical thinking, the Law is God's greatest gift to his people; in Christian thinking, the Law is God's standard of behavior—the gold standard no one can meet. Paul asserts in Romans that, “the righteousness from God has been manifested apart from law, though testified to by the law and the prophets, the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ” (Romans 3: 21-22). In Paul's thinking, the Law is the straight line against which we measure our crookedness, and in doing so the Law demonstrates our desperate need for a savior. The author of Hebrews concurs when he writes: “Since the law has only a shadow of the good things to come, and not the very image of them, it can never make perfect those who come to worship . . .” (Hebrews 10: 1).

The Tabernacle

After giving the Ten Commandments and demonstrating how to apply them, God offers his second great gift, the Tabernacle. In Exodus 25: 2-9 he says to Moses:

Speak to the Israelites. Let them receive contributions for me. From each you shall receive the contribution that their hearts prompt them to give me. These are the contributions you shall accept from them: gold, silver, and bronze; violet, purple, and scarlet yarn; fine linen and goat hair; rams' skins dyed red, and tahash skins; acacia wood; oil for the light; spices for the anointing oil and for the fragrant incense; onyx stones and other gems for mounting on the ephod and the breastpiece. They are to make a sanctuary for me, that I may dwell in their midst. According to all that I show you regarding the pattern of the tabernacle and the pattern of its furnishings, so you are to make it.

Exodus 25-40 focuses on the design and building of this Tabernacle. It is described in intricate detail, from the measurements of the walls, to the design of the fabrics, to the tiny golden bells and pomegranates on the hem of the high priest's robe. If we look at a schematic of the Tabernacle, we will see its overall design:



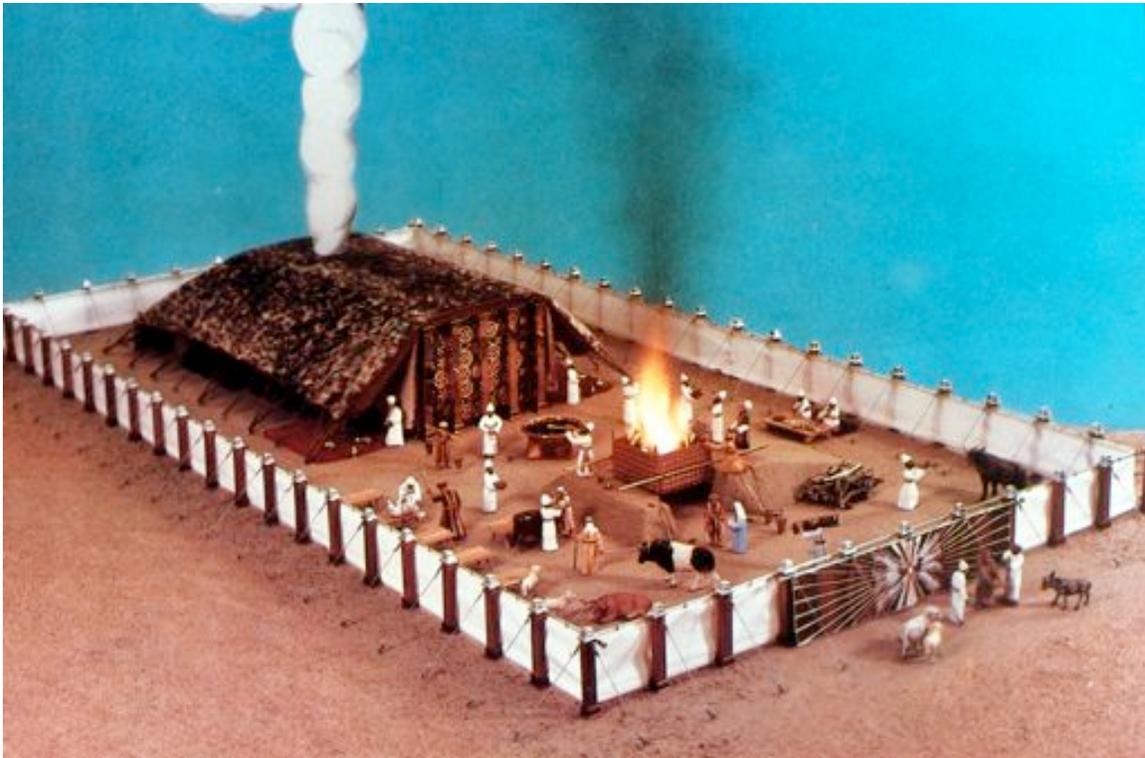
Facing east, the courtyard of the Tabernacle measures one hundred cubits by fifty cubits (150 x 75 feet), and it is constructed of pure white, fine-twinned Egyptian linen hung on sixty posts with bronze bases and silver hooks and bands. The east side of the courtyard has a fifteen cubit-long (22 ½ feet) white curtain hung on three posts to the left, and another curtain of the same size on three posts to the right. The entrance at the center has a twenty cubit-long (30 feet) white curtain, embroidered with blue, purple and scarlet yarn, hung on posts with bronze bases and silver hooks and bands. Bronze tent pegs

anchor the posts. The courtyard has a fourfold purpose: 1) it prevents unlawful approach to the Tabernacle itself; 2) it keeps out wild animals; 3) it is a demarcation between an infinitely holy God and sinful man; and 4) with its single gate, it offers only one approach to God.

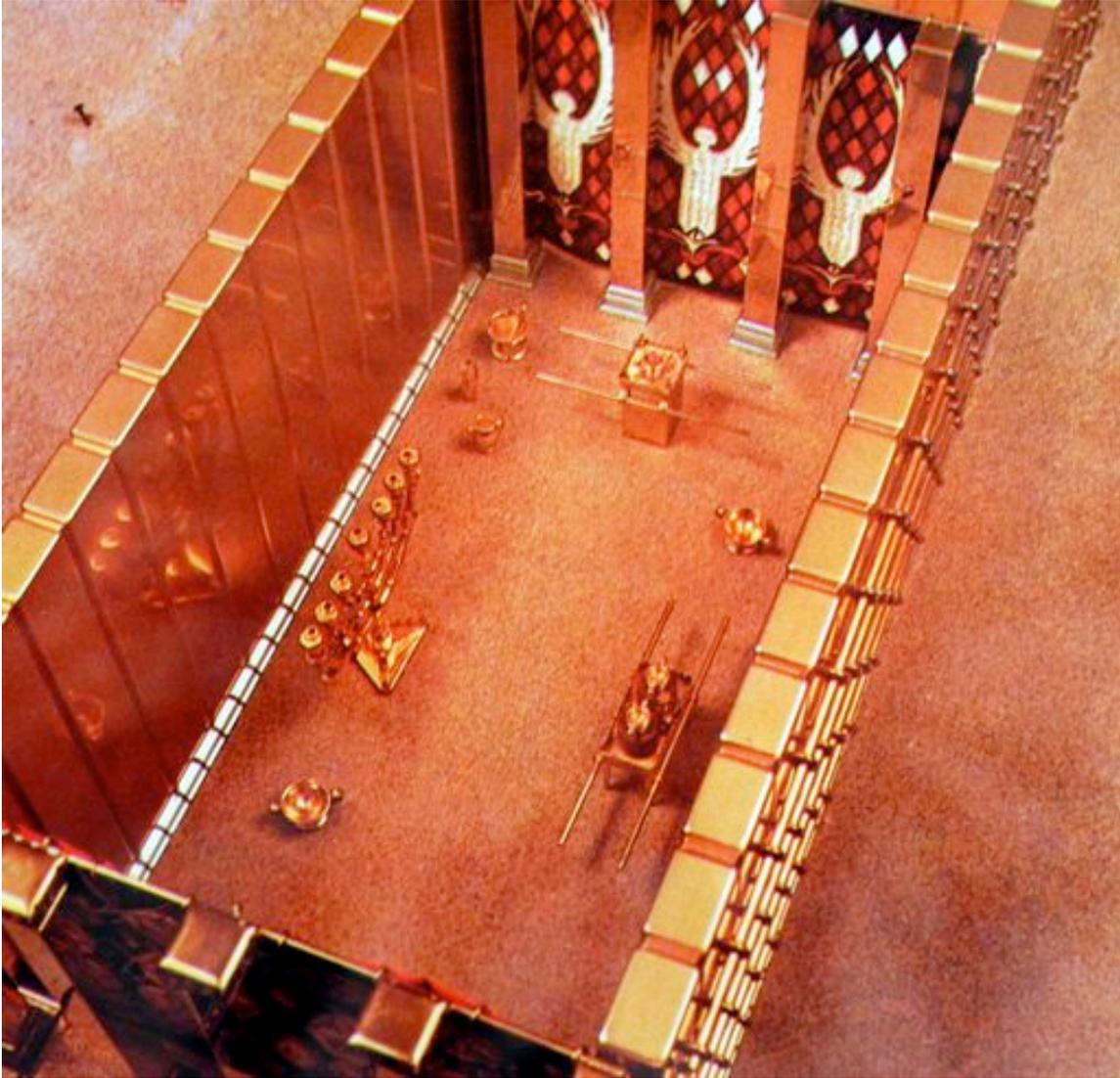
On entering the courtyard, one first encounters a bronze altar. It is made of acacia wood, and it is three cubits high (4 ½ feet) and five cubits square (7 ½ feet), with horns on top of the four corners. The whole structure is overlaid with bronze. The altar contains a bronze grate, and both the grate and the altar have bronze rings attached at the corners, supporting acacia-wood poles, overlaid with bronze, for carrying.

Next is a wash basin, or laver. It is made of bronze with a bronze stand, and it is used by the priests for washing.

At the western end of the courtyard sits the Tabernacle itself, a structure measuring thirty cubits (45 feet) by ten cubits (15 feet). An aerial view shows the courtyard and the placement of the objects within it:



The Tabernacle itself is divided into two chambers, the outer chamber measuring twenty cubits (30 feet) by ten cubits (15 feet) and the inner chamber measuring ten cubits square (15 feet square).



The outer and inner chambers are constructed of upright frames of acacia wood measuring ten cubits long (15 feet) and a cubit and a half wide ($2 \frac{1}{4}$ feet), each one overlaid with pure gold and each inserted into two silver sockets. There are twenty frames on the north side and twenty on the south. There are six frames on the west end, with double frames on the corners, eight in all, each resting on two silver sockets. Five acacia-wood crossbars overlaid with pure gold slip through five sets of golden rings on each upright holding the walls firmly in place.

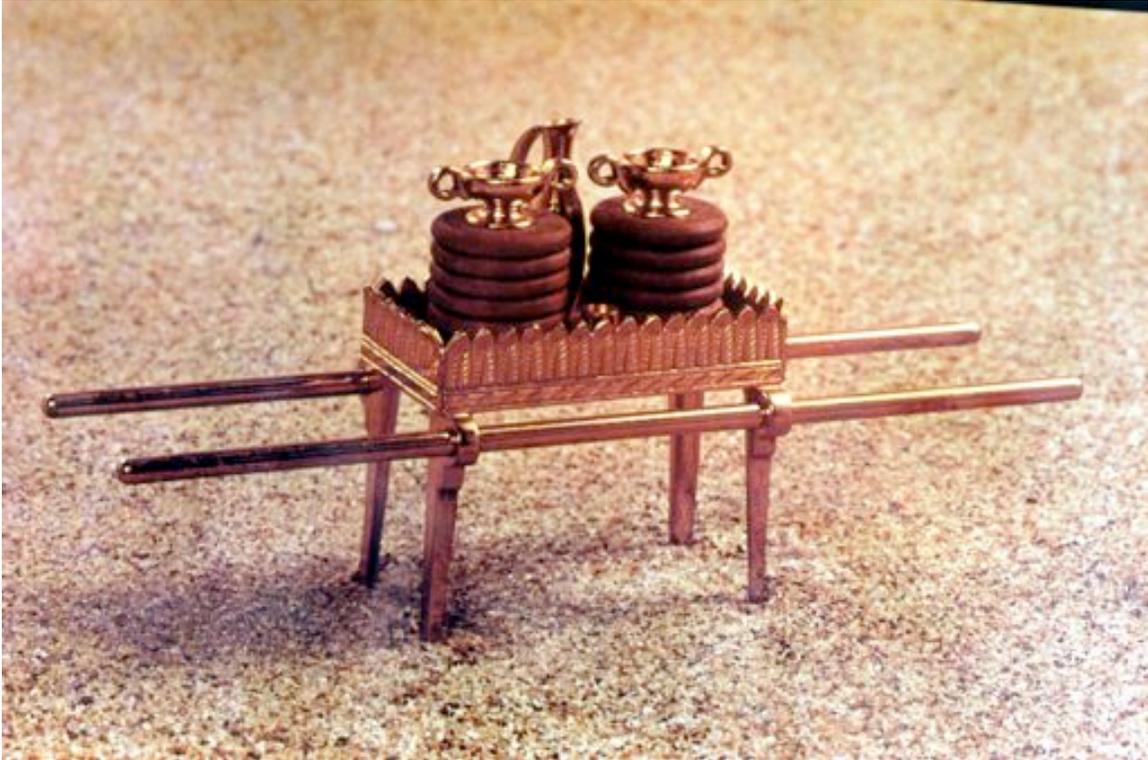
Another linen curtain embroidered with blue, purple and scarlet yarn covers the entrance to the Tabernacle. It hangs on golden hooks from five acacia-wood posts, each overlaid with gold, and each inserted into bronze sockets.

The outer chamber contains three items. To the left is a lamp stand, or *menorah*, made of pure gold with three branches extending from either of its sides.



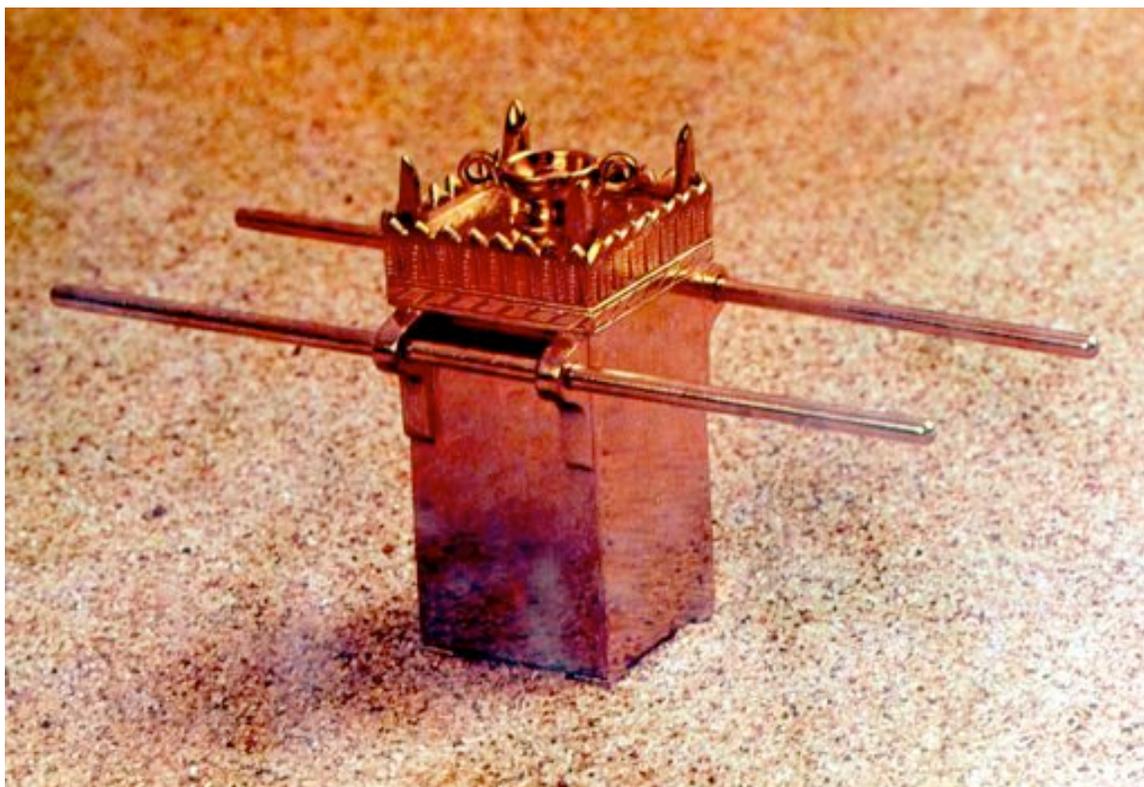
The flower-like cups, buds and blossoms are of pure gold, and a golden cup, shaped like an almond flower, tops each of the seven lamps. The lamp provides light for the outer chamber. The wick trimmers and trays used to service the lamp stand are also made of pure gold. In total, the lamp stand and its accessories weigh one talent (75 pounds).

To the right stands a table with bread and wine placed upon it.



The table consists of acacia wood, two cubits long (3 feet), a cubit wide (1 ½ feet), and a cubit and a half high (2 ¼ feet). It is overlaid with pure gold, and a gold molding frames the top, measuring a handbreadth wide (3 inches). Two acacia-wood poles overlaid with pure gold slip through four golden rings attached to the legs of the table for carrying. The plates, pitchers and bowls that accompany the table are also of pure gold. Twelve loaves of unleavened bread and wine rest on the table, with the bread changed weekly.

In front of the curtain sits a golden altar of incense.



Like the table, the altar of incense consists of acacia wood a cubit long (1 ½ feet), a cubit wide (1 ½ feet) and two cubits high (3 feet). The horns on the four corners of the altar are one piece with the altar itself. The whole is overlaid with pure gold, and a gold molding a handbreadth wide surrounds the top. Four gold rings support two acacia-wood poles, overlaid with gold, for carrying.

A curtain of fine-twined Egyptian linen embroidered with blue, purple and scarlet yarn with cherubim worked into it separates the outer from the inner chamber. It hangs on four golden hooks suspended on four posts of acacia wood overlaid with pure gold, inserted into four silver sockets.



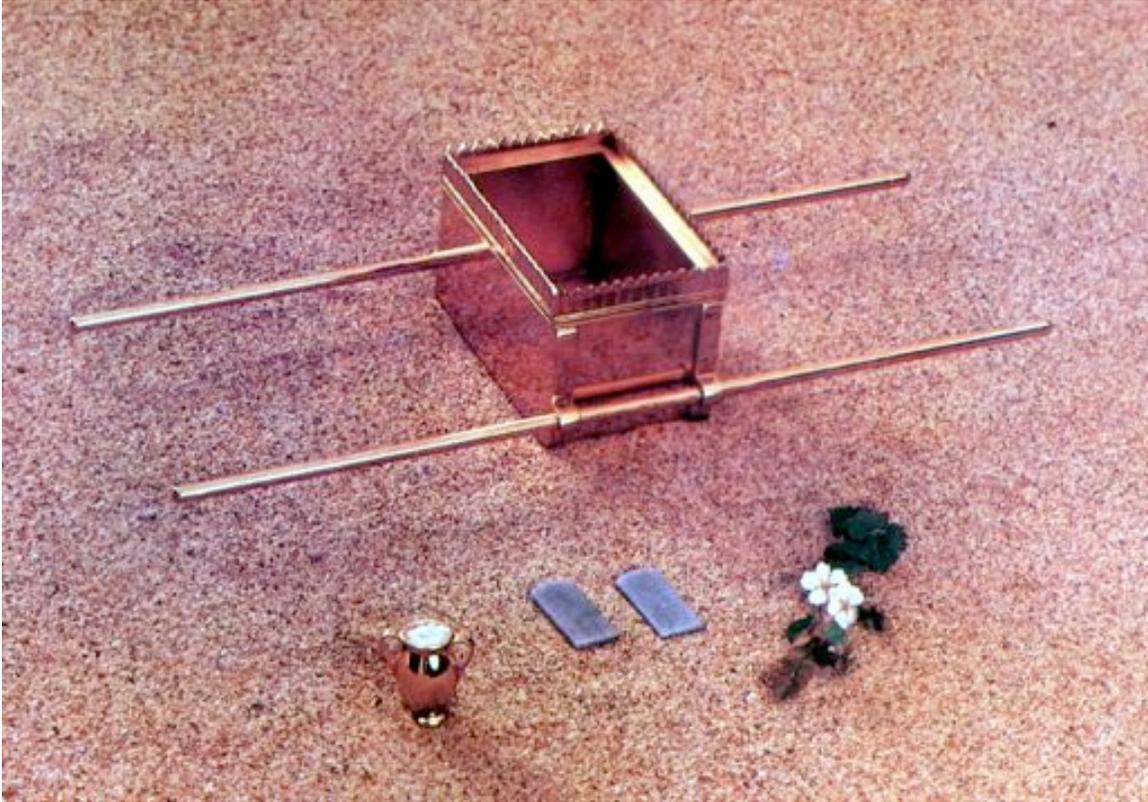
The Ark of the Covenant rests in the inner chamber.



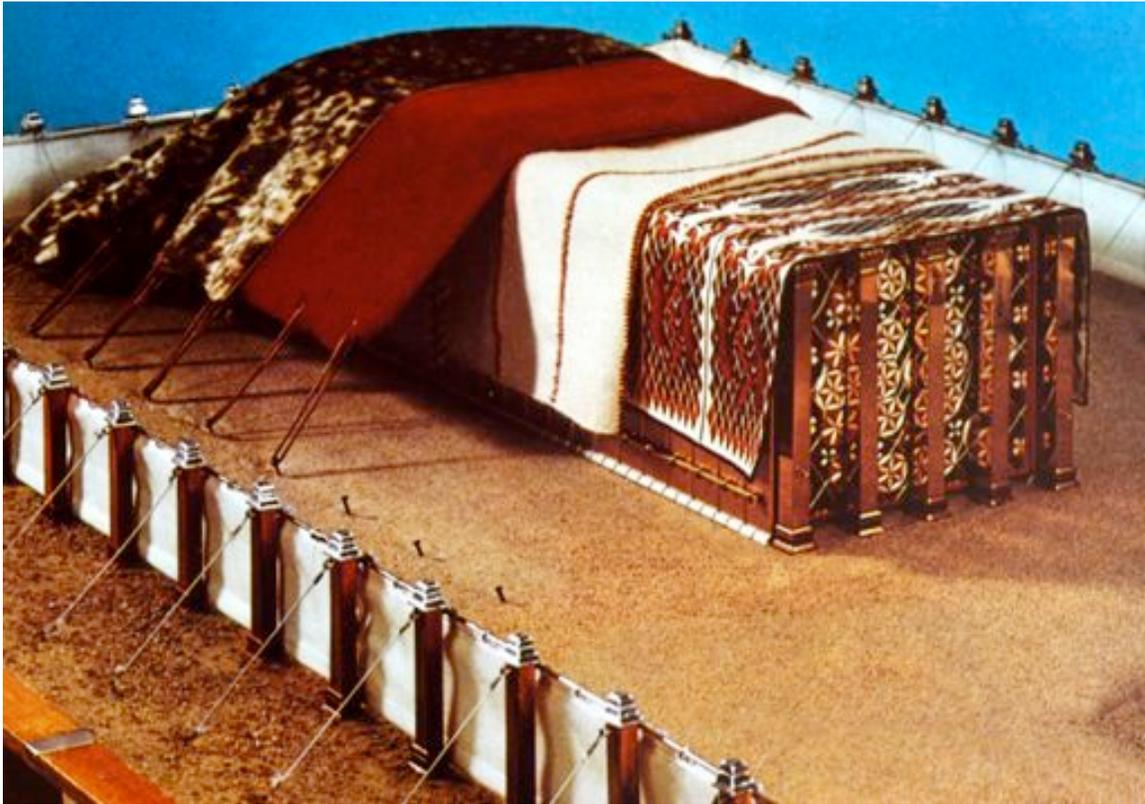
It is a chest of acacia wood measuring two and a half cubits long ($3 \frac{3}{4}$ feet), a cubit and a half wide ($2 \frac{1}{4}$ feet), and a cubit and a half high ($2 \frac{1}{4}$ feet). It is overlaid with pure gold, inside and out, with a solid gold molding around it. Four golden rings support two acacia-wood poles, overlaid with gold, for carrying.

The lid of the chest consists of one piece of solid gold, two and a half cubits long ($3 \frac{3}{4}$ feet) and a cubit and a half wide ($2 \frac{1}{4}$ feet) with two cherubim of hammered gold at the ends of the cover with their wings spread out toward each other.

Three items rest inside the chest: 1) the tablets of the Ten Commandments, 2) a golden jar of manna, and 3) Aaron's staff that blossomed.



Four layers cover the Tabernacle.



The first layer consists of ten curtains of fine-twinned Egyptian linen, embroidered with blue, purple and scarlet yarn, with cherubim worked into them. Each curtain measures twenty-eight cubits long (42 feet) by four cubits wide (6 feet), and each curtain has fifty loops of blue material along the edges. The curtains are then fastened together with fifty golden clasps inserted through the loops.

The second layer consists of eleven curtains of goat hair, each measuring thirty cubits long (45 feet) by four cubits wide (6 feet). Five curtains are joined together into one set and six curtains into a second set. The sixth curtain is folded double at the front of the Tabernacle, and the remaining length hangs down the rear of the Tabernacle. Bronze clasps inserted through fifty loops on the long edges hold the curtains together.

The third layer consists of ram skins dyed red, and the fourth of the hides of sea cows—probably dolphins, which are dark grey or black in color.

Only priests are permitted to enter the courtyard or the Tabernacle, and only the High Priest is permitted to enter the inner chamber—or Holy of Holies—and then only once a year, on the Day of Atonement, which is described in Leviticus 16.

The priests are dressed in white linen, but the High Priest wears seven garments:



- 1) After bathing, the High Priest puts on an *undergarment* of fine-twinned Egyptian linen, which reaches from his waist to his thigh.
- 2) Over the undergarment he wears a *white tunic* made of fine-twinned Egyptian linen.
- 3) Over the tunic rests a *robe* made entirely of blue cloth with an opening for the head in its center; the opening has a woven edge to keep it from tearing. Around the hem of the robe hang small alternating golden bells and pomegranates made of blue, purple and scarlet yarn.
- 4) Over the robe is an *ephod* made of fine-twinned Egyptian linen, embroidered with gold and with blue, purple and scarlet yarn. It has two shoulder straps and a waistband made of the same material as the ephod; it is of one piece with the ephod. An onyx stone rests on each shoulder in a gold filigree setting. One stone carries the names of the first six sons of Israel, in the order of their birth, and the other stone carries the names of the remaining six sons, in the order of their birth. Two braided chains of pure gold, like a rope, anchor the settings. When the High Priest enters the Tabernacle he bears the names of the twelve sons of Israel on his shoulders.
- 5) A *breastpiece*—or pocket—made of fine-twinned Egyptian linen, embroidered with gold and with blue, purple and scarlet yarn attaches to the ephod. It measures a span square (9 x 9 inches). Four rows of precious stones are mounted on the breast piece: the first row consists of a ruby, a topaz, and a beryl; the second row, a turquoise, a sapphire, and an emerald; the third row, a jacinth, an agate, and an amethyst; and the fourth row a chrysolite, an onyx and a jasper. Each is mounted in a gold filigree setting, and on each is engraved the name of one of the twelve tribes. Golden rings and chains hold the breast piece in place. When the High Priest enters the Tabernacle he bears the names of the twelve tribes on his heart.

An Urim and a Thummim, sacred lots used by the High Priest to discern God's will, reside inside the breast piece.

- 6) A *turban* made of fine-twinned Egyptian linen sits on the High Priest's head.
- 7) A *golden plate* is attached to the turban by a blue cord, and the words "Holy to the Lord" are engraved on the plate.

Once God gives Moses the plan for the Tabernacle the people set about building it, and when it is completed . . .

the cloud covered the tent of meeting, and the glory of the Lord filled the tabernacle. Moses could not enter the tent of meeting because the cloud settled down upon it, and the glory of the Lord filled the Tabernacle.

Whenever the cloud rose from above the tabernacle, the Israelites would set out on their journey. But if the cloud did not lift, they would not go forward: only when it lifted did they go forward. The cloud of the Lord was over the tabernacle by day, and fire in the cloud at night, in the sight of the whole house of Israel in all the stages of their journey.

(Exodus 40: 34-38)

As the Law provides a set of principles by which a covenant people is to live with God and with one another, the Tabernacle provides a means by which sinful humanity gains access to an infinitely holy God. As we read through Exodus we might wonder why Scripture presents the Tabernacle in such detail: it takes up fifteen of forty chapters, nearly a third of the text.

In Hebrews we find our answer. The author of the Epistle to the Hebrews has been speaking of Melchizedek, the archetype of the great High Priest whom we meet in Genesis 14, and in chapter eight of Hebrews our author says:

The main point of what has been said is this: we have such a high priest, who has taken his seat at the right hand of the throne of the Majesty in heaven, a minister of the sanctuary, and of the true tabernacle that the Lord, not man, set up. . . . They [the priests] worship in a copy and shadow of the heavenly sanctuary, as Moses was warned when he was about to erect the tabernacle. For he says: “See that you make everything according to the pattern shown you on the mountain.”

(Hebrews 8: 1-2; 5)

We learn what one *does* with the Tabernacle when we study Leviticus.

All Tabernacle illustrations are taken from: Paul F. Kiene. *The Tabernacle of God in the Wilderness of Sinai*, trans. by John S. Crandall. Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan Publishing House, 1977. Reprinted by permission.

Exodus Outline

I. The Exodus (1:1-19:8)

A. Prologue (1:1-22)

B. Introduction to Moses

- i. Birth (2:1-10)
- ii. Moses kills the Egyptian slave master (2:11-15)
- iii. Moses flees Egypt and settles in Midian (2:16-25)
- iv. Moses called by God (3:1-4:17)
 1. The burning bush (3:1-10)
 - a. Moses' call (3:10)
- v. Moses gives five reasons why he can't answer the call (3:11-4:17)
 1. "Who am I . . .?" (3:11-12)
 2. "Suppose I go . . .?" (3:13-22)
 3. "What if they do not believe me . . .?" (4:1-9)
 4. "I have never been eloquent . . ." (4:10-12)
 5. "*Please* send someone else . . ." (4:13-17)
- vi. Moses returns to Egypt (4:18-7:13)
 1. Moses sets out on the journey (4:18-23)
 2. Moses and his wife, Zipporah, argue (4:24-26)
 3. Aaron meets Moses (4:27-28)
 4. Moses and Aaron deliver God's message to the Israelites (4:29-31)

C. Moses vs. Pharaoh (5:1-15:21)

- i. First encounter with Pharaoh (5:1-21)
 1. Moses' demand (5:1)
 2. Pharaoh's response (5:2-18)
 3. Israelite's response (19-21)
 4. Moses complains to God (5:22-23)
 - a. God's response (6:1-8)
 - b. Moses' response (6:9-12)
 - c. God reiterates his call (6:13; 28)
 - 1) Genealogy of Moses and Aaron (6:14-27)
 - d. Moses declines (6:30)
 - e. God appoints Aaron as Moses' spokesman (7:1-6)
- ii. Second encounter with Pharaoh (7:8-13)
- iii. Plague #1: Blood (7:14-24)
- iv. Plague #2: Frogs (7:25-8:11)
- v. Plague #3: Gnats (8:12-15)

- vi. Plague #4: Flies (8:16-28)
- vii. Plague #5: Diseased Livestock (9:1-7)
- viii. Plague #6: Boils (9:8-12)
- ix. Plague #7: Hail (9:13-35)
- x. Plague #8: Locusts (10:1-20)
- xi. Plague #9: Darkness (10:21-29)
- xii. Plague #10: Death of Firstborn (11:1-12:30)
 - 1. Passover (12:1-30)

- D. The Israelites leave Egypt (12:31-19:8)
 - i. Pharaoh's order (12:31-32)
 - ii. Israelites pack and leave (12:33-13:16)
 - 1. Passover regulations (12:43-51)
 - 2. Consecration of firstborn (13:1-16)
 - iii. Crossing the Red Sea (13:17-15:21)
 - 1. Moses and Miriam's song of thanksgiving (15:1-21)
- E. From the Red Sea to Mount Sinai (15:22-18:27)
 - i. Trouble with water (15:22-27)
 - 1. God sweetens the water of Marah (5:25)
 - ii. Trouble with food (16:1-36)
 - 1. God provides quail (16:13)
 - 2. God provides manna (16:14-36)
 - iii. Trouble with water—again (17:1-7)
 - 1. God provides water from the rock at Horeb (17:6)
 - iv. Trouble with enemies (17:8-16)
 - 1. Moses and Joshua defeat the Amalekites (17:10-13)
 - v. Trouble with leadership (18:1-27)
 - 1. Jethro suggests delegating authority (18:14-23)
- F. At Mount Sinai (19:1-8)
 - i. The covenant reaffirmed (19:3-8)
 - 1. God speaks (19:4-6)
 - 2. The people reply (19:8)

II. The Law (19:9-24:18)

- A. Prologue (19:9-25)
- B. The Ten Commandments (20:1-17)
 - i. Commandment #1: No other Gods (20:2-3)
 - ii. Commandment #2: No idols (20:4-6)
 - iii. Commandment #3: No misuse of God's name (20:7)
 - iv. Commandment #4: Keep the Sabbath (20:8-11)
 - v. Commandment #5: Honor father and mother (20:12)
 - vi. Commandment #6: No murder (20:13)

- vii. Commandment #7: No adultery (20:14)
- viii. Commandment #8: No theft (20:15)
- ix. Commandment #9: No false testimony (20:16)
- x. Commandment #10: No coveting (20:17)

C. Epilogue (20:18-21)

D. Applications of the Ten Commandments (20:22-24:18)

- i. Prologue (20:22-26)
- ii. Regarding Hebrew servants (21:1-11)
- iii. Regarding personal injuries (21:12-36)
- iv. Regarding personal property (22:1-15)
- v. Regarding social responsibilities (22:16-31)
- vi. Regarding justice and mercy (23:1-9)
- vii. Regarding religious obligations (23:10-19)
- viii. Epilogue (23:20-24:18)

III. The Tabernacle (25:1-40:38)

A. Blueprint for the Tabernacle (25:1-31:18)

- i. Prologue (25:1-9)
- ii. The Ark of the Covenant (25:10-22)
- iii. The table of showbread (25:23-30)
- iv. The golden lamp stand (25:31-40)
- v. The tent (26:1-37)
 - 1. Coverings (26:1-14)
 - 2. Framing (26:15-30)
 - 3. Curtains (26:31-37)
- vi. The courtyard (27:1-19)
 - 1. The altar of burnt offerings (27:1-8)
 - 2. The perimeter (27:9-19)
- vii. The oil for the lamp stand (27:20-21)
- viii. The priests (28:1-29:46)
 - 1. The High Priest's vestments (28:1-43)
 - a. Prologue (28:1-5)
 - b. The ephod (28:6-14)
 - c. The breast piece (28:15-30)
 - d. The robe (28:31-35)
 - e. The turban's golden plate (28:36-38)
 - f. The tunic, turban and sash (28:39-41)
 - g. The linen undergarments (28:42-43a)
 - h. Epilogue (28:43b)
 - 2. Consecrating the priests (29:1-37)
 - a. Prologue (29:1-9)
 - b. The sin offering (29:10-14)

- c. The burnt offering (29:15-18)
 - d. The wave offering (29:19-26)
 - e. The fellowship offering (29:27-34)
 - f. Epilogue (29:35-37)
- ix. The offerings (29:38-46)
- x. The altar of incense (30:1-10)
- xi. Atonement money (30:11-16)
- xii. The wash basin (30:17-21)
- xiii. The anointing oil (30:22-33)
- xiv. The incense (30:34-38)
- xv. Epilogue (31:1-18)
 - 1. The craftsmen (31:1-11)
 - 2. The Sabbath (31:12-19)
 - 3. Final statement (31:18)
- B. Interlude (32:1-34:35)
 - i. The golden calf (32:1-33:6)
 - ii. The tent of meeting (33:7-11)
 - iii. Moses confers with God (33:12-34:35)
 - 1. God reveals his Glory (33:12-23)
 - 2. God reiterates his commandments (34:1-28)
 - 3. Moses' face is radiant (34:29-35)
- C. Building the Tabernacle (35:1-40:38)
 - i. Prologue (35:1-3)
 - ii. The material assembled (35:4-29)
 - iii. The craftsmen chosen (35:30-36:7)
 - iv. The tent assembled (36:8-38)
 - v. The Ark of the Covenant assembled (37:1-9)
 - vi. The table of showbread assembled (37:10-16)
 - vii. The lamp stand assembled (37:17-24)
 - viii. The altar of incense assembled (37:25-29)
 - ix. The altar of burnt offerings assembled (38:1-7)
 - x. The wash basin assembled (38:8)
 - xi. The courtyard assembled (38:9-20)
 - xii. The materials used during construction (38:21-31)
 - xiii. The priestly vestments assembled (39:1-31)
 - xiv. Moses inspects the components (39:32-43)
 - xv. The Tabernacle set up (40:1-33)
 - xvi. Epilogue (40:34-38)

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Exodus

Syllabus

Week 1 (May 18, 19, 20)

Lesson #1: From Freedom to Slavery

At the end of Genesis Jacob and his family moved to Egypt to be with Joseph, who had become “Prime Minister” of Egypt, second only to Pharaoh. The family settled in the land of Goshen, the most fertile area of the northeastern Nile delta, and there they flourished. When we turn the page from Genesis to Exodus, 400 years flash by and Jacob’s family of 70 has become a people of nearly 2 million. As security threats to Egypt, the Israelites have become oppressed and enslaved.

In Lesson #1 we examine how all this came to pass, and we take a close look at the Egypt Moses knew, the Egypt that serves as the setting for the Book of Exodus.

Lesson #2: Moses, Prince of Egypt (Exodus 1: 1-22)

In Lesson #2 we witness the plight of the Israelites and we meet Moses, one of the great characters of Scripture. Born to a Levite couple, Moses is saved from the infanticide ordered by Pharaoh: he is adopted by Pharaoh’s daughter and brought up in the household of Pharaoh, a prince of Egypt. In Acts 7: 22, Stephen tells us that “Moses was educated [in] all the wisdom of the Egyptians and was powerful in his words and deeds.” He had been groomed and positioned for leadership in Egypt, perhaps as a great statesman, politician or general.

Then at 40 years old, in a moment of righteous indignation and anger, Moses throws it all away by killing an Egyptian who was abusing a Hebrew slave. His crime discovered, Moses flees Egypt, a wanted criminal, running all the way to the backside of the desert in the land of Midian. There he goes “off the grid” for the next 40 years, working as a shepherd, the lowliest of occupations.

Psalm 90 is ascribed to Moses, and in it he writes: “Seventy is the sum of our years, or eighty, if we are strong” (Psalm 90: 10). To any objective reader Moses has reached the end of his life, a total failure.

Assignment

Read: Exodus 1: 1 – 22.

Enrichment Material

“Reading Guide, Exodus,” *The Catholic Study Bible*, pp. 115-124.

Lawrence Boadt, “The Exodus from Egypt,” *Reading the Old Testament*, pp. 127-143.

Week 2 (May 25, 26, 27)

Lesson #3: The Call and Commission of Moses (Exodus 1: 23 – 4: 31)

Four hundred years have passed since God spoke to the Israelites, as far as Scripture is concerned. During that time the Israelites have lived in Egypt, one of the most dazzling and sophisticated cultures on the face of the earth, a culture that spawned a pantheon of gods and a fully developed, deeply mystical theology. At Thebes, the religious capital of ancient Egypt, massive temples bore witness to powerful gods who were served by an army of priests, men consecrated to divine service and the religious life. If the Israelites knew anything about the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, it was little more than the faint echo of a folktale from a long time ago.

Meanwhile, on the remote backside of the desert, in the rugged landscape of the Sinai wilderness amidst snakes, scorpions and jackals, the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob speaks to Moses from within a burning bush, telling him to return to Egypt and redeem his people!

The contrast between the gods of Egypt and the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob is stark and startling. What kind of God is this, one who dwells in a bush in the middle of nowhere?

Moses responds by giving five reasons why he cannot go!

Lesson #4: Moses Confronts Pharaoh (Exodus 5: 1 – 7: 7)

Convinced (no, *commanded*) by God, Moses journeys back to Egypt to confront Pharaoh and demand that Pharaoh “let my people go!” Accompanied by his older brother Aaron (Moses is 80; Aaron is 83), Moses confronts Pharaoh . . . meeting with utter failure and humiliation. Indeed, Pharaoh responds as a modern-day corporate oligarch might to two elderly, feeble and has-been union organizers: Pharaoh ejects them from his office and doubles the workload of his laborers.

What's more, the Israelites turn on Moses and Aaron, saying: "The Lord look upon you and judge! You have made us [a stench] to Pharaoh and his servants, putting a sword into their hands to kill us" (Exodus 5: 21).

How's that for gratitude?

Assignment

Read: Exodus 1: 23 – 7: 7.

Week 3 (June 1, 2, 3)

Lesson #5: "Gunfight at the OK Corral," Plagues 1-5 (Exodus 7: 8 – 9: 7)

After being tossed out of Pharaoh's office and rejected by their own people, Moses and Aaron confer with God, who ups the ante and sends Moses and Aaron back to Pharaoh with an ultimatum: "Let my people go" or I will wreak havoc on the land of Egypt.

In Lesson #5 God unleashes the first five of ten plagues on Egypt, and with each plague Pharaoh becomes evermore stubborn and recalcitrant. As we make our way through the ten plagues we find they are far more than intensified natural occurrences; they are cumulative; and they are precisely designed to do three things:

- 1) teach the Israelites who God is;
- 2) teach the Egyptians who God is; and
- 3) bring judgment on the gods of Egypt.

Lesson #6: "Gunfight at the OK Corral," Plagues 6-10 (Exodus 9: 8-12: 36)

In Lesson #6 the plagues intensify, finally crippling Egypt and bringing Pharaoh to his knees. Hearing the cries and moans of his people as the angel of death stalks the night, while holding the cold, lifeless body of his own first-born son, Pharaoh commands Moses: "Leave my people at once, you and the Israelites!" (Exodus 12: 32).

The Israelites, convinced that if they don't "get out of Dodge fast" the Egyptians would slaughter them all, plunder and loot their Egyptian neighbors, pull up stakes and leave *en masse*.

Assignment

Read: Exodus 7: 8 – 12: 36.

Week 4 (June 8, 9, 10)

Lesson #7: *The Exodus (Exodus 12: 36 – 15: 21)*

Leaving Egypt the Israelites avoid the Via Maris, the main northbound international trade route that parallels the Mediterranean Sea; instead they head southeast toward the Red Sea, a ruse intended to confuse the Egyptians.

Arriving near the northern tip of the Gulf of Suez, the Israelites look up and see the Egyptians in hot pursuit. With their backs to the sea and the Egyptians bearing down upon them, the Israelites cry out to Moses: “Were there no burial places in Egypt that you brought us to die in the wilderness? What have you done to us, bringing us out of Egypt?” (Exodus 14: 11).

Then an extraordinary thing happens:

Moses stretched out his hand over the sea; and the Lord drove back the sea with a strong east wind all night long and turned the sea into dry ground. The waters were split, so that the Israelites entered into the midst of the sea on dry land, with the water as a wall to their right and to their left.

(Exodus 14: 21-22)

At daybreak, when the last Israelite reaches the far shore, the towering walls of water collapse, drowning the entire Egyptian army.

The Israelites celebrate with a chest-bumping, high-fiving victory song:

*I will sing to the Lord for he is gloriously triumphant;
Horse and chariot he has cast into the sea . . . !*

Lesson #8: *On the Road to Mt. Sinai (Exodus 15: 21 - 18: 27)*

It is one thing to escape from Egypt; it is quite another to survive the aftermath. In Lesson #8 Moses and the Israelites confront the stark reality of finding enough food and water in the wilderness to survive. In Exodus 12: 37 we read that “The Israelites set out from Rameses for Succoth, about six hundred thousand men on foot, not counting the children,” and in the opening chapters of Numbers the Israelites take a census by tribe, clan and family totaling 603,550 men, plus women and children—roughly 2 million people. It is *impossible* to support that many people in the Sinai wilderness: period.

Survival calls for a miracle, and God provides it: he makes bitter water sweet, brings water from the rocks and provides daily manna to eat, nurturing and sustaining his people through their wilderness journey.

Assignment

Read: Exodus 12: 36 – 18: 27.

Week 5 (June 15, 16, 17)

Lesson #9: God Reaffirms the Covenant (Exodus 19: 1-25)

After a three-month journey through the wilderness from Egypt to Mt. Sinai the Israelites camp in front of the mountain. There, God reaffirms the covenant he made with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, saying:

You have seen how I treated the Egyptians and how I bore you up on eagles' wings and brought you to myself. Now, if you obey me completely and keep my covenant, you will be my treasured possession among all peoples, though all the earth is mine. You will be to me a kingdom of priests, a holy nation.

(Exodus 19: 4-6)

The people respond: “Everything the Lord has said, we will do” (Exodus 19:8).

In Lesson #9 we examine the Abrahamic covenant in depth, defining precisely what the covenant *is*; the obligations and privileges it imposes on both parties, God and the Israelites; and what consequences follow for meeting—or breaking—the terms of the covenant.

Lesson #10: The Law (Exodus 20: 1 – 26)

Once God reaffirms the covenant and the people accept the terms of the covenant, God provides the first of two great gifts to his people: the Law, specifically the “Ten Commandments.” Writ on two tablets of stone, the Ten Commandments are ten *principles* by which a covenant people is to live with God and one another.

The Ten Commandments are not unique, but have antecedents in both Hittite and Mesopotamian laws and treaties: they are foundational to the functioning of any organized social structure.

In Lesson #10 we explore the Ten Commandments in depth.

Assignment

Read: Exodus 19: 1 – 20: 26.

Week 6 (June 22, 23, 24)

Lesson #11: Applying the Law, Part 1 (Exodus 21: 1 – 22: 5)

The Ten Commandments are ten principles by which a covenant people is to live with God and one another, but those principles must be *applied* in specific cases. In a very important sense, the Ten Commandments are to their applications what the U.S. Constitution is to municipal case law.

In Lesson #11 we explore how these principles are applied in regard to *people*.

Such application opens the door to a vast body of rabbinical thinking on the Law. Indeed, as we continue our study through the Torah (Genesis through Deuteronomy) we will find 613 specific laws to implement the ten principles! The Law is far more than the Ten Commandments; it is God's *comprehensive teaching* on all aspects of life.

Lesson #12: Applying the Law, Part 2 (Exodus 22: 6 – 24: 18)

In Lesson #12 we continue our exploration our application of the Law in regard to *property* and to *God*.

Assignment

Read: Exodus 21: 1 – 24: 18.

Week 7 (June 29, 30; July 1)

Lesson #13: The Tabernacle (Exodus 25: 1 – 27: 21)

After God reaffirmed his covenant with the people he gave them two great gifts. In Lessons #10 we explored God's gift of the Law, ten principles by which a covenant people is to live with God and one another, and in Lessons #11 and #12 we learned how to apply those principles in regard to God, people and property.

In Lesson #13 we explore God's second great gift to his people, the Tabernacle. The Tabernacle is a physical structure that enables a sinful people to gain access to an infinitely holy God. In Exodus 25: 1 – 27: 21 God provides detailed instructions on the material, design and construction of the Tabernacle.

As we shall see, the intricate detail is important for we learn in Hebrews that the Tabernacle is "a copy and shadow of the heavenly sanctuary, as Moses was warned when he was about to erect the tabernacle . . . : 'See that you make everything according to the pattern shown you on the mountain'" (Hebrews 8: 5).

Lesson #14: *The Priesthood* (Exodus 28: 1 – 31: 18)

As the Tabernacle is a physical structure that enables a sinful people to gain access to an infinitely holy God, the priest is the mediator between a sinful people and a holy God. A priest *by definition* stands between the people and God, and he speaks to God on behalf of the people.

In Lesson #14 God appoints Moses' brother Aaron as high priest and Aaron's sons Nadab, Abihu, Eleazar and Ithamar as priests.

In Israel priests are drawn solely from the tribe of Levi. In Judaism one cannot feel "called" to be a priest, aspire to be a priest or study to be a priest: one is *born* a priest—or not. The Jewish priesthood is *purely* hereditary.

Assignment

Read: Exodus 25: 1 – 31: 18.

Week 8 (July 6, 7, 8)

Lesson #15: *The Golden Calf* (Exodus 32: 1 – 33: 23)

After God raises up Moses to lead his people out of Egypt; after God slams Egypt with ten plagues; after God parts the Red Sea and saves his people; after God reaffirms his covenant with his people; and after God gives his two great gifts, the Law and the Tabernacle, the Israelites turn away from God and Moses to worship a golden calf!

What's *that* all about?

In Lesson #15 we investigate.

Lesson #16: *The Ten Commandments, 2nd edition* (Exodus 34: 1–35)

After settling the score with the leaders of the "Golden Calf Rebellion," Moses ascends Mt. Sinai once again to confer with God, who says to him: "Cut two stone tablets like the former, that I may write on them the words which were on the former tablets *that you broke*" (Exodus 34: 1).

Moses then recommits himself and the Israelites to God's covenant, spending forty days and forty nights on the mountain in an extraordinarily intimate relationship with God. When Moses descends the mountain his "face had become radiant" (Exodus 34: 29).

In Lesson #16 we explore God's intimate relationship with Moses.

Assignment

Read: Exodus 32: 1 -34: 35

Week 9 (Jul 13, 14, 15)

Lesson #17: Building the Tabernacle (Exodus 35: 1 – 40: 38)

When Moses comes down off the mountain once again, work on the Tabernacle begins in earnest. Bezalel the chief artisan, along with his assistant Oholiab and the other craftsmen, construct the Tabernacle, weaving the tent cloth and coverings, building the ark of the covenant, the table of showbread, the menorah, the altar of incense, the altar of burnt offerings and the courtyard.

In Lesson #17 we construct the Tabernacle and set it up!

Lesson #18: The Pillar of Cloud and Fire (Excursus)

We first encountered the pillar of cloud and fire in Lesson #7 as it led the Israelites out of Egypt:

The Lord preceded them, in the daytime by means of a column of cloud to show them the way, and at night by means of a column of fire to give them light. Thus they could travel both day and night. Neither the column of cloud by day nor the column of fire by night ever left its place in front of the people.

(Exodus 13: 21)

The pillar of cloud and fire both guides and protects the Israelites on their journey to Mt. Sinai, and when the tabernacle is built “the cloud covered the tent of meeting, and the glory of the Lord filled the tabernacle. Indeed, the pillar of cloud and fire will stay with the Israelites from the Exodus in 1446 B.C. until 592 B.C. when it leaves the Temple in Jerusalem, ascends the Mount of Olives and disappears down the eastern slope toward Jericho, never to be seen again.

What exactly is this pillar of cloud and fire?

In Lesson #18 we examine it.

Assignment

Read: Matthew 35: 1 – 40: 38.

Week 10 (July 20, 21, 22)

Lesson #19: Christ in the Tabernacle (Excursus, Part 1)

The clearest understanding we have in Scripture of the Lord Jesus Christ is not in the Gospels, but in the Tabernacle, in its structure and operation. The epistle to the Hebrews tells us that the Tabernacle is a copy or shadow of the genuine Tabernacle, which is in heaven (Hebrews 8: 5). Hebrews goes on to say that as the high priest ministers at the Tabernacle, interceding with God on our behalf, so does Christ, our great high priest who sits at the right hand of the Father, minister at the genuine Tabernacle in heaven.

Likewise, as the priest offers the blood of sacrificial animals at the Tabernacle as atonement for the sins of the people, so does Christ offer his own blood at the genuine Tabernacle, making atonement *once and for all* for the sins of humanity.

After Jesus' resurrection he spends forty days with his disciples teaching them "everything written about me in the *Law of Moses* and in the prophets and psalms must be fulfilled" (Luke 24: 44).

The Tabernacle formed a major unit in Jesus' syllabus!

Lesson #20: Christ in the Tabernacle (Excursus, Part 2)

Lesson #20 concludes our examination of the Tabernacle, with some final thoughts on the Exodus.