

Aquifer Open Study Notes (Book Intros)

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Exodus

What does it mean to be in a relationship with God, the ultimate being in the universe? How does one establish that relationship? What is that relationship like, and what does it take to stay in it? These are questions that people around the world have been asking since the beginning of time. The book of Exodus provided the ancient Israelites with answers to such questions, revealing not only what was required of them in a relationship with God, but also what God had graciously done to make that relationship possible.

Setting

The Exodus occurred sometime between 1450 and 1250 BC, when Egypt was arguably the greatest military and cultural power in the world. During Egypt's 18th dynasty (1550–1295 BC) the pharaohs built an empire beyond Egypt's borders, extending its control far into the north, up the Canaanite coast, and far to the south along the Nile. This imperial thrust seems to have fueled a megalomaniacal building program. As the house of the pharaoh grew in power, so the god of the royal house, Amon-Re, gained dominance. The land remained staunchly polytheistic, but worship of Amon-Re seems to have surpassed devotion to all other gods.

It was during this period that the Israelites departed from Egypt. God did not sneak his people out during a time of Egyptian weakness; he led them forth when Egyptian strength was at its height.

Summary

The term *exodus* derives from the Greek word exodos, which means “the way out.” [Exodus 1–15](#) is about the Hebrews’ “way out” of Egypt. The rest of Exodus (chs [16–40](#)) reveals that the Hebrew people needed more than rescue from bondage in Egypt: They needed a way out of their sin and a way into fellowship with God. Exodus addresses Israel’s great needs: to be set free from bondage (chs [1–15](#)), to know who God is and what he is like through the covenant at Sinai (chs [16–24](#)), and to experience fellowship with God through the Tabernacle (chs [25–40](#)). All of us have the same need to be set free, to know God, and to experience fellowship with him.

Authorship

Moses is traditionally considered the author of the Pentateuch ([Genesis—Deuteronomy](#)), though many scholars call this into question. See Genesis Book Introduction, “Authorship.”

The Date of the Exodus (1446 or 1270 BC)

The date of Israel's exodus from Egypt is the key question in determining Israel's early chronology. The Bible's focus on the sequence of events and their meanings rather than a strict chronology makes it difficult, however, to assign exact dates for the Exodus. A number of chronological indicators help point the way.

First, according to [1 Kings 14:25–26](#), Pharaoh Shishak raided Judah in the fifth year of King Rehoboam's reign. This date is known from sources outside the Bible to be 926 BC. Earlier dates in Israel's history, such as the year Solomon began building the Temple (967 BC) and the date of the Exodus, are calculated by working backward from this fixed point and attempting to harmonize as much data as possible.

A second chronological indicator for the date of the Exodus is the "new king" who "knew nothing about Joseph" ([Exod 1:8](#)). This comment most likely signals the arrival of a new dynasty. In the 1700s BC, foreigners from Asia began migrating to Egypt. In 1648 BC, one group of such foreigners, the Hyksos, invaded Lower Egypt and gained control of the region. Joseph and Jacob very likely entered Egypt ([Gen 39; 46](#)) shortly before or during the Hyksos period. The Hyksos ruled until 1540 BC, when Pharaoh Ahmose (1550–1525 BC) expelled them. Ahmose and the pharaohs who followed him were probably the dynasty described by [Exodus 1:8](#).

A third chronological indicator is the Merneptah Stela, an Egyptian monument dated to roughly 1209 BC, which mentions a clash with the Israelites in the southern part of Palestine. This is the first clear mention of Israel outside the Bible.

This evidence points to two possible scenarios for the date of the Exodus—an early date of about 1446 BC and a later date of about 1270 BC.

Early Exodus (about 1446 BC) The traditional scenario places the date of the Exodus around 1446 BC. According to [1 Kings 6:1](#), Solomon began construction of the Temple in the fourth year of his reign (967 BC), 480 years after the Exodus from Egypt. If the number 480 refers to calendar years, then the date of the Exodus was about 1446 BC, and Israel's entry into Canaan was around 1406 BC. Archaeologists have discovered the Amarna

letters, a cache of letters from Canaanite city chieftains asking Pharaoh Akhenaten (around 1352–1336 BC) to help them fight against certain rabble who were attacking them. This is a possible reference to the Israelites and would support the early dates for the Exodus and conquest. Additionally, in about 1100 BC Jephthah described Israel as having inhabited the Promised Land for 300 years (see [Judg 11:26](#); cp. [Num 21:21–35](#)). The early date seems to fit best with the Bible's own chronological information. A date near 1446 BC, therefore, has long been accepted.

Late Exodus (about 1270 BC) The late Exodus scenario places the Exodus from Egypt approximately 300 years before the dedication of Solomon's temple in 967 BC, early in the reign of Pharaoh Rameses II (1279–1213 BC). The city of Rameses, which the Israelites helped build ([Exod 1:11](#)), was named after this pharaoh, and there is evidence of significant construction activity dating to the early 1200s BC at the site. Additionally, archaeologists working in Palestine between World Wars I and II reported that they were unable to find any evidence of the conquest taking place in the early 1300s BC, as required by the early date. They did, however, claim to have found evidence of conquest and increased settlement activity in the late 1200s BC. If these findings are accurate and reflect Israelite activity in the Promised Land, they would support the idea that the Exodus occurred around 1270 BC. Those who opt for this later date contend that the number 480 in [1 Kings 6:1](#) is a symbolic number (12 generations times 40 years to symbolize a generation); in that case, the actual length of time would have been closer to 300 years (12 generations times 25 years, the approximate length of an actual generation).

Dates for the Patriarchs

Genesis provides the relative ages of Israel's patriarchs, Abraham to Joseph, but it does not fix absolute dates for their lives. Israel's patriarchs (Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob) were powerful family chiefs who moved from place to place. Unlike the leaders of empires who created permanent records, the patriarchs did not have palaces or libraries in which to deposit records. Also, the climate of Palestine is not favorable to the preservation of documents.

The date of the Exodus is therefore a key for calculating dates for the patriarchs. Calculations also take into account the lifespan of each patriarch; the chronological notations in [Gen 12:4](#); [21:5](#); [25:26](#); [47:9](#) suggest that the patriarchs spent 215 years in Canaan.

The length of Israel's stay in Egypt is an additional factor, and here there is a difference in texts. The Hebrew Masoretic Text (MT) for [Exodus 12:40](#) says that Israel spent 430 years in Egypt, from the year that Jacob entered Egypt to the year of Israel's Exodus. However, the early Greek Old Testament translation (the Septuagint, or LXX) and the Samaritan Pentateuch (another significant manuscript) both say that the 430-year period mentioned in [Exodus 12:40](#) includes the time the Israelites spent in both Canaan and Egypt (a chronology that Paul apparently followed; see [Gal 3:17](#)). This chronology would reduce the time spent in Egypt to 215 years. Various biblical statements that Israel was in Egypt for 400 years or four generations ([Gen 15:13-16](#); cp. [Exod 6:16-20](#); [Num 3:17-19](#); [26:58-59](#); [1 Chr 6:1-3](#); [Acts 7:6](#)) could support the reading of either the Hebrew or the Greek text.

Fitting all the data together is challenging. While the dates of the Exodus or the patriarchs cannot be determined with absolute certainty, perhaps they were never intended to be. The biblical authors did not set out to provide a complete chronological record. What we do have is an excellent correlation between Israel's historical records and those of the surrounding cultures.

Meaning and Message

The opening chapters of Genesis depict a serious problem: God made the world and human beings for blessing ([Gen 1:27–28](#)), but the world fell under a curse. Humanity had become deeply corrupted ([Gen 6:5](#)), alienated from their Creator ([Gen 3:23–24](#)) and from one another ([Gen 4:14](#)). Death, violence, and confusion were rampant ([Gen 4:8, 23–24; 11:9](#)). Was there a way back to the blessing that God originally intended?

In [Gen 12–50](#), God's plan to restore the world begins to unfold. God chose Abraham and his descendants to be in a special covenant relationship with him, promising to make them into a prosperous nation through which the entire world would be blessed ([Gen 12:1–3](#)). Abraham believed God despite the fact that his wife seemed hopelessly barren ([Gen 15:6](#)), and God soon began to fulfill his promises ([Gen 21:1–7](#)).

As the book of Exodus begins, however, the validity of God's promises to Abraham is in question. Yes, Abraham's descendants had grown to a great number, but they were now slaves in Egypt, and Pharaoh, the mightiest king in the world, was committed to keeping them subjugated. As for the Promised Land, Abraham and his descendants had never actually owned any of it except for a burial plot ([Gen 23](#)). How would a group of slaves, slated to be absorbed into the Egyptian underclass, ever inherit the Promised Land and become a blessing to the world? Could God keep his promises? Did he even want to keep them? Did he really care for the Israelites, and did he even know what they were going through? Did the promises of Genesis have any real value?

In answering those questions, Exodus moves us far down the road to understanding who God is. God really does know our situation, and he values us. The Lord is in an altogether different category from "all other gods" ([18:11](#)). He is revealed in Exodus as the greatest being in existence ([3:5–6, 14–15; 6:3](#)), superior both to human kings who think of themselves as gods and to all the forces of nature. He is the one true God.

The people of Israel had spent some 400 years absorbing Egypt's mistaken pagan beliefs. Now they would have to unlearn them: There are not many gods, only one. God is not the same as the natural world around them; he stands apart from the world, which he created. God cannot be

manipulated by magic. Existence is not defined by an eternal struggle between positive and negative forces. God is holy, absolutely other, profoundly ethical in all of his relationships, passionately loyal to his creatures, and desiring to do good for them ([34:5–6](#)).

God used a covenant ([Exod 19–23](#)) to teach his people who he is and what their relationship with him should be like. The covenant teaches us God's ethical nature. In the ancient world, ethics and religion were largely unrelated. By contrast, most of the requirements of God's covenant have to do with how people treat one another (see [20:3–17](#)). Those who are in a covenant relationship with God must treat one another ethically.

God rescues his people and calls us into a life of holiness in order that we may have a living, personal relationship with him. The Tabernacle chapters ([25–40](#)) are not an add-on; they are what the Exodus was all about. Yes, God would keep his promise of taking the people to the Promised Land, but his goal was for them to live in his presence without being destroyed by his holiness, and that is what happened ([40:34–38](#)). Salvation is not merely the forgiveness of sins. God's goal for us is that, having been rescued from the bondage of sin, we might live daily in the glory of his presence and manifest his holy character.