



ON THE MOVE

Teaching Exodus

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1 Introduction

The book of Exodus tells the story of the descendants of Jacob, picking up the story about 400 years after Jacob had gone down to Egypt with his 11 sons. Joseph, the twelfth was already there having been sold into slavery but rising through divine intervention to a position of authority overseeing the famine relief.

Historical context

The events recorded are considered to have happened either around about the 15th Century BC or the 13th depending on how chronological dating is followed. The 15th Century seems to fit with some assumptions of Biblical chronology allowing for Solomon to have taken the throne in about 971BC.¹ However, the 13th Century date would fit with the naming of the cities of Pithom and Ramses in Exodus 1:11 with Ramses named after Ramses II, popularly considered to be the Pharaoh who enslaved the Israelites.² This would also seem to fit with data suggesting that the Israelites were in the land by the 1200s.³ We should not worry too much about the challenges of harmonising ancient history. There is still much that is unknown about that time period with much to discover.

God's people are referred to as "Hebrews" when in Egypt. The root of the term refers to someone passing through, a nomad. There was also an ancestor of Abraham called Eber, named in the Genesis 10-11 genealogy, Shem's Great Grandson. So, when Abraham is referred to as "a Hebrew" in Genesis 14:13, it may have been a reference to his ancestry but it remains more likely that it was a reference to his status as a migrant. Joseph is referred to as a Hebrew by the Egyptians.⁴ It is possible that the term was already being used to refer to the descendants of Abraham however the more likely options are that again this was a reference to his foreign, migrant status and/or that the term has been read back into the events of Genesis 39 and 41 by a later author or redactor.

Egypt itself had seen a number of migrations, power struggles and dynasties. We may particularly note the arrival of the Hyksos, like the Hebrews, semitic people from the Levant who settled in the Delta area between 1650-1550 AD. If the earlier dating of the Exodus to 1500BC is correct, then that would fit with the emergence of the Hyksos as the dominant people in Egypt. It would make sense of the king's daughter bathing in the Nile close to where Hebrews were and it would also give additional reason for this people would have been more likely to see the Israelites as rivals for land, economy and power rather than benign immigrants. A later dating in the 13th century may however have meant that the ruling dynasty conflated the Hebrews with the Hyksos and saw them as rivals.

Joseph's arrival in Egypt may have been during the 12th dynasty founded by Amenemhat I⁵ either during his reign or that of his descendant Senusret II.⁶ This dynasty shifted power away from Thebes and worship away from the traditional gods. Whether Moses lived in the 15th or 13th Century, it would have been under the 18th Dynasty with power returned to Thebes and a return

¹ Alexander, Exodus, 24.

² Alexander, Exodus, 25.

³ Alexander, Exodus, 20.

⁴ Genesis 39:14&17; Genesis 41:12.

⁵ [Amenemhat I - Wikipedia](#)

⁶ [Senusret II - Wikipedia](#)

to orthodox Egyptian religion in place.⁷ These factors help us to understand why a new Pharaoh and a new dynasty would mean that the events of Joseph's day were now forgotten.

Authorship date and audience

Traditionally, the first five books of the Bible are associated with Moses as author. However, this does not require us to assume that Moses wrote everything down himself. We know for example that there are parts of the Torah that were written after his death. It is more likely first that Moses is the central figure with whom key events are associated and as a custodian of the oral traditions of God's people. It is also likely that whilst the JPED source theory is now widely disregarded as wooden and reductionist that there were various sources collated together.⁸ From that perspective, Moses may well have been involved in the editing of literary works that may have had further, later redactions.

The consequence of such debates is that dating the book is difficult. It is a matter of tradition that Moses wrote the books and this claim is not explicitly stated in the Pentateuch.⁹ Whilst Jesus refers to Moses speaking, he may be using shorthand to refer to the accepted author.

If we cannot say with any certainty who the author was then it is difficult also to identify the original audience and intent. If we err cautiously and conservatively on the side of late authorship as some scholars do, this would mean that the intended audience was either the exiles or those coming back from exile. In that case, the book's intent was to help them make sense of their own exile and a second exodus by reference to their forefathers.

However, I am inclined to think that even if the final form of the books came together late, significant portions of them existed in written form and that there would have been oral story telling too. Additionally, we are encouraged now to think in terms of literary context, who does the author intend us to think of as the first audience and so to identify with and stand with as we listen.

On that basis, I would argue that the first audience was the Israelites as they were about to enter the land and during the early days of the conquest. This is the generation who had not experienced Egypt or the initial journey to Horeb and beyond. These books then serve first as a reminder to them that they should not forget their history and to help them understand why they had been wandering in the wilderness. It teaches them what it means to be a migrant people, looking for a permanent home.

Of course, though, a book will have multiple audience and so the Torah books served a purpose in speaking to the exiles and returnees. Moreover, crucially, the inspiration of Scripture means that we are meant to hear God's Word as the intended audience. This book is for the church and is intended to help us make sense of life now in the now and not yet, our exodus from Satan's Kingdom and our journey home into the full life of God's kingdom. If we read or hear Scripture as church though, it is important that we apply it through Christ. Jesus was himself an audience and he is clear in Luke 24 that these words are about him and his Exodus from death to resurrection.

Structure

⁷ [Eighteenth Dynasty of Egypt - Wikipedia](#)

⁸ C.f. Enns, *Exodus.*, 20-21.

⁹ C.f. Enns, *Exodus.*, 20-21.

I would suggest the following breakdown of the book:

- Ch 1-2 The Rescued rescuer
- Ch 3-4 A sign and a sending
- Ch 5-10 Confrontation of the gods
- Ch 11-15:21 Crossing over
- Ch 15:22 -ch 18 A hungry and thirsty people
- Ch 19-24 The Law
- Ch 25 40:31:18 Signs and symbols of God's presence
- Ch 32-34 Rebellion,
- Ch 35-40:33 Moving In
- Ch 40:34 38 The glory of the Lord

Theme of the book

The big theme of the book is “Redemption,” This is the story of how Yahweh delivers his people. As such, the themes of the book have often been picked up by oppressed people and unsurprisingly has been popular within Black theology as it gives voice to those seeking freedom from slavery and oppression. I believe that it is a good and healthy thing to be alert to those modern-day echoes, just as we see the way that Exodus is echoed through Scripture. However, primarily we should see how the book points to the liberation that Jesus has won from slavery to sin and death.

2 The Rescued Rescuer

The book of Exodus introduces us to God's people in danger. 500 years after Jacob's family had gone down into Egypt we find a people who have grown in number but a king who has forgotten God's blessing and provision. The people are enslaved, oppressed and threatened with genocide. Very quickly we will get to see how God's plans to deliver his people begin with a plan to deliver the one who was going to deliver them. Let's have a look in detail at the first two chapters.

God's people but not in God's place

The book of Exodus begins with the words "These are the names of the sons of Israel who went down to Egypt" (Exodus 1:1). This opener becomes the basis for Hebrew title of the book "These are the names". The book begins with one of those generational lists that punctuate Genesis so demonstrating continuity.

Multiplication

We are told that there were 70 that went down to Egypt. This could have a symbolic element to it as 70 becomes representative of perfection, the number of the nations, Sanhedrin and of the translators of the Hebrew Scriptures into Greek. Perhaps, alternatively this is the foundation for the symbolism.¹⁰ The point though is that the Hebrews start as a small number when they arrive in Egypt at the end of Genesis but have grown mighty in number by now (1:7). God's creation mandate to fill and subdue the earth (Genesis 1:26-28) is being fulfilled as also is his promise to Abraham to make a mighty nation from him (Genesis 12:1-3).

Exile

However, there are two problems right at the start of the book. If the promise to Abraham was a people, under God's rule and blessing, living in God's place or land then only one out of the three is being fulfilled. The people are not in the place that God has promised the (Canaan). It is worth recalling that leaving the land and going down to Egypt was not considered a positive in Genesis. Abram had brought great trouble by seeking refuge from famine and lying about Sarai, his wife being his sister. However, the exile to Egypt had been prophesied by God when making his covenant promise. There would be a 400 year period echoed later by the 400 years of silence prior to Christ's coming. Moreover, there had been no choice for Joseph who had been sold as a captive into slavery in Egypt.

This is relevant to contemporary discussions and controversies. Dominion Theology or the Seven Mountain Mandate talks about our ability to influence this world and take power with one book on the theme entitled "Invading Babylon: The seven-mountain mandate." However, we see in the Old Testament that God's people find themselves in Egypt and later Babylon against their will. Exile is forced and that is the context in which we today find ourselves, longing to be at home with the Lord (not merely going to heaven but present in his new creation under his rule and reign). In the meantime, we find ourselves in exile against our desire. That is the context in which we are told to seek the good of the city in which we find ourselves

Persecuted

¹⁰ Alexander advises caution but suggests that Israel may be seen as "a microcosm corresponding to the entire world" Alexander, Exodus, 38.

Secondly, rather than experiencing God's rule; his provision, protection and blessing, the Israelites find themselves under the harsh authoritarian rule of a new Pharaoh. It is possible that it is not just the passage of time that means he has forgotten Joseph but also that he belongs to a different dynasty to the Pharaoh of Joseph's day. The NIV's wording "to whom Joseph meant nothing," makes good sense of the language of forgetting (1:8).

The King fears the Hebrews and so has a twofold strategy for dealing with them. First, he forces them to work for him as slaves building his cities (1:8-14)¹¹. The intent is to make life bitter for them, a hostile environment if you like. This will later lead to a dilemma. The Egyptian regime wanted rid of the Israelites and perhaps by making life harsh, they hoped to encourage them to leave and migrate back to Canaan. However, the king and country quickly become economically dependent on the slaves. As our sidenote, we cannot avoid the similarities with modern immigration policies and controversies.

Secondly, he seeks to commit genocide by killing the baby boys, an action that will later be echoed by Herod's attempts to eliminate Jesus. If Herod sought to rely on the Magi for help, Pharaoh was dependent on the Israelite midwives who refused to cooperate. Their explanation that they are not able to keep up with the speed of delivery of Hebrew boys should not be seen as a deception. Rather, this is defiant humour. "Come on, we cannot possibly kill those baby boys." They are mocking the king. God blesses the midwives and Pharaoh attempts a new strategy by ordering baby boys to be murdered by being thrown into the Nile. What this does is force his evil into the open. He won't be able to blame the midwives and hide behind possible mishaps in delivery (1:15-18). In recent years we have seen a shift in what might be described as a "culture of death" here in the UK. Whilst unpleasant and wicked, something to be resisted, we may recognise that the move to unrestricted abortion to birth and attempts to justify gender selective abortion brings this evil more into the open. Similarly, we have heard increasingly overt arguments for euthanasia on the basis that older and ill people are a burden on society.

Conclusion

Exile is closely associated with death in the Old Testament. In fact, exile may be seen as a form of death. Adam and Eve are exiled from Eden whilst physical death is an exile from the ground on which we live itself. Egypt becomes a paradigm for this World under judgement. Pharaoh's actions in seeking to destroy Israel is an attempt at de-creation. This is particularly seen in the methodology of drowning in the Nile. The river was seen as the source of life and a god to Egypt but becomes the demon of death to Israel. Watery destruction represents judgement and decreation as seen in the Genesis flood.¹² Secondly it stands for the condition of unbelievers. Outside of Christ we are dead in our sin and slaves to sin.

Thirdly, Egypt is a paradigm for the experience of God's people in exile. The exile to Babylon may be considered a second Egypt experience and so a second Exodus is promised. The New Testament paradigm is that we are scattered exiles, in the world but not of it.¹³

¹¹ This would fit with a picture where according to Kitchen, "For over 350 years (CA/ 1540-1170, from their conquest and repeated campaigns in Canaan and Syria, Egtpys kings brought back batches of prisoners regularly, sometimes in considerable numbers. Besides domestic, cultic and artisanal duties as before, the new accessions of manpower were employed to cultivate land, and could be used in building projects. In brick making the most famous comes from a scene in the tomb chapel of the vizier Rekhmire of circa 1450." *Kitchner, on the Reliability of the Old Testament*, 247.

¹² See Enns, *Exodus*, 43-44.

¹³ See 1 Peter 1.

The waters of death (part 1)

The story of Exodus focuses in on one family. A man from the tribe of Levi marries and his wife gives birth to a son.¹⁴ We know from later that he is not the only child, he has a sister, Miriam, and brother, Aaron. Whether Miriam is from a previous/first wife or whether the narrator simply glosses over her existence at first, the intent is to focus our intention in on this child. He may not be the literal firstborn but Scripture treats him as such. He is the one who will take centre stage in the story, the one who will somehow inherit God's promises (Exodus 2:1-2).

Moses mother observes that he is "good". What exactly is meant by this? It may be that she sees that he is healthy and so likely to survive if cared for, not a sickling. However, as Enns notes, the language here links back to Genesis 1 where God observes that his creation is good.¹⁵ We are reminded that whilst Moses is worth saving because of something good in him and God the Father is well pleased in his son, Jesus, there is nothing good in us that makes us worthy of salvation. That is solely God's grace to us. They hide the baby for three months but it becomes impossible to hide him any longer, so the mother makes a basket from reeds and then paints it with a coat of bitumen to make it waterproof. The basket is actually called a "*tevah*", an "ark" and the language here seems to intentionally echo the description of Noah's ark in Genesis 6.¹⁶ They place the baby in the ark and then place the ark into the Nile waters, hidden by bullrushes. This is an act of faith. They place him in the very place where the Egyptians were ordering the babies to be thrown to their deaths just as God placed Noah in the very waters of death brought in judgement on sinful mankind. This is an act of faith. They have no plan for what happens next, just a hope that the ark will keep him safe (v3-4).

His sister watches from a safe distance. Then one of Pharaoh's daughters comes down to the Nile to bathe. She discovers the basket and baby, recognising him as a Hebrew. His sister comes forward and offers to find a nurse for the baby. She gets his mother who agrees to look after him until he is old enough to live in the palace, adopted as the princess's son. At this point he is named Moses (v5-10).

One day, Moses goes out to find his own people. He is distressed at what he sees as he witnesses their oppression. He intervenes to protect his fellow Hebrews and kills an Egyptian guard. On another occasion he attempts to break up a fight between two Hebrew slaves. Their response is "who do you think you are? Are you going to kill us too?" Realising that he has been seen, Moses flees into the wilderness of Midian as Pharaoh seeks to kill him (v11-13).

In Midian he intervenes to protect again. This time some women attempting to use a well, harassed by male shepherds. Their father gives one of his daughters, Zipporah in marriage to him and together they have children. It is of course at a well that Abraham's servant meets Rebekah and realises that she is the one for Isaac. Jacob had met Rachel at a well and helped

¹⁴ Alexander notes that the author delays naming Amran and Jochebed as Moses' parents until 6:20. Indeed, there is a general tendency to delay naming. Moses' name is not revealed until v10 (though this perhaps reflects the point of his legal adoption as son, when he is named officially by the princess). Miriam is not named at this stage either. Alexander suggests that the delay in offering names here puts the focus on Levi as the tribal head and links Moses and his family to the later Temple service. Alexander, *Exodus*, 61.

¹⁵ Enns, *Exodus*, 61.

¹⁶ I think that Alexander is over cautious here in his reservations about drawing such a link. He argues that Moses represents only one person out of God's Israel so we should not emphasise this as a salvation act for God's covenant people. However, God specifically chooses to work through Moses in order to deliver his people. C.f. Alexander, *Exodus*, 21.

her to get water. Jesus will meet a woman at a well who has failed to receive the protection and satisfaction she needed in 5 marriages and offers her, instead of dead waters, living water (v14-22).

Meanwhile, back in Egypt, the Pharaoh has died and God has heard the cries of his people. We are told that he remembers his covenant. Though of course, God had never forgotten. Indeed, we have already seen him begin to act to deliver his people in choosing and delivering Moses. Indeed, the way in which Moses experiences deliverance through waters and then flees to spend 40 years in the Wilderness foreshadows the way in which God will later deliver his people through the waters of the Red Sea, the waters of death and lead them for 40 years through the same wilderness.

More importantly, these events foreshadow the way in which Jesus will be kept safe, in Egypt from another murderous king as a child, how later he will pass through the waters of the River Jordan in baptism and spend 40 days in prayer in the wilderness (v14-25).

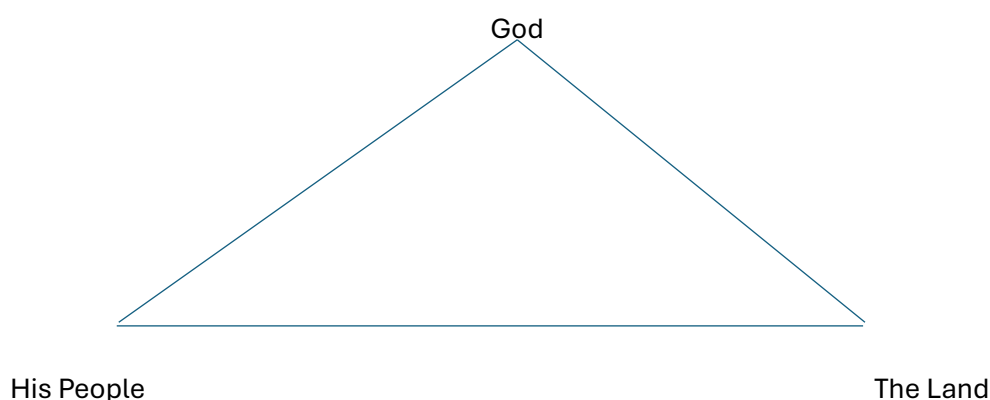
The big themes

How do the first two chapters of Exodus play their part in moving the story of God's redemption plan along? We have already seen connections in the detail from an observation of something good, through to another ark and of course the part that wells make in Biblical hook ups. Finally, I hope you spotted the contrast between God as the King who remembers his covenant and Pharaoh, the King who forgets.

However, I would suggest that we can also see how things connect together by looking at some big, Biblical Theology themes too. Graham Goldsworthy identifies three big themes about God's Kingdom that appear through the Bible.

- (a) "God's people
- (b) In God's place
- (c) Under God's rule"¹⁷

Chris Wright represents this paradigm using the following diagram.¹⁸



¹⁷ Goldsworthy, "Gospel and Kingdom" 54.

¹⁸ Adapted from Wright, Christopher JH, *Old Testament Ethics for the People of God* (IVP, Nottingham: 2004), 19.

Here in Exodus 1-2, we meet God's people, the Israelites, or Hebrews, living in Egypt where they have been for 400 years. During that time, they have grown in number reflecting God's blessing in Genesis 1:26-28 and his promise to Abraham in Genesis 12:1-3 of multiplication. They have grown in number and spread out. However, they are not in the land, they are not in the place that God has for them. They are in exile. This also means that instead of subduing the earth, they are the ones who are subdued. It also means that instead of being in a place of life and blessing like the Garden of Eden, they are in a place of slavery, death and curse.

The story focuses in on one family and one person, Moses. He is God's chosen person. In fact, he is from the line of Levi identifying a priestly role for him. Moses will be the one to represent God to the people and the people to God in order to bring them into the place of God's presence and blessing. He will give them God's Law so that they will live under Yahweh's rule. Through Moses, they will experience God's provision and protection. So, as the representative of God's people, Moses finds himself provided for and protected through God's providence. He is in the place that God has for him, safe in an ark, although that ark is itself not a permanent home, there is a now and not yet to Moses' experience. Moses then finds himself in exile, in the desert, estranged from his people, in no man's land.

Applying Exodus 1-2

The obvious and central theme in these first few chapters is the one of salvation. We see how God delivers Moses and then the people of Israel. This is first of all crucial as these events in history were essential to make it possible for Jesus to come. Secondly, they act as types or foreshadows pointing to the way in which Jesus would save us.

I believe that as well as emphasising this main, Gospel application, there are other applications we can pick up along the way. For example, Moses' deliverance in an ark like basket through waters of death creates an opportunity to talk about baptism. We can also see how God is at work through his providential care. We trust in the God who remembers. This must also serve too to warn us against becoming forgetful of what God has done.

I think it is right too to pick up on some ethical side points. The people of Israel find themselves in a foreign and hostile land. The cruelty of their treatment sadly reminds us of the experience of many today who find themselves displaced as immigrants and asylum seekers. Too often, they find that they are dehumanised and demonised. Exodus 1-2 has things to say about how we treat one another. There can be no place for either tolerance or a blind eye to modern day slavery or to racism in the Church.

The motif of exile is a frequent one in the New Testament. God's people today live as exiles, in the World but not of this world, just as Jesus came down from his home in heaven. Exodus 1-2 reminds us that God is with us, even when living in this world is hard and even oppressive.

3 A sign and a sending (Exodus 3-4)

The Burning Bush

Moses joins in taking responsibility for his father-in-law, Jethro's sheep. One day, he is taken the flock to pasture near to Horeb or Sinai. The author identifies this as the Mountain of the Lord, foreshadowing what will happen years later when God will choose this place to meet Moses and to give his Law to the people. He sees a bush that is on fire. That's not the unusual thing here though. In the heat of the desert, burning bushes were two a penny. What catches his attention is that the bush is not consumed by the fire. Specifically, we are told that "the angel of the Lord" appears to Moses. Yet, throughout the encounter, and this would be similar for other Biblical encounters, there seems to be an overlap between the angel and the Lord himself. I think that we are meant to pick up on this. It is God who is speaking, God who is revealing himself and yet this cannot be unmediated. So, he has a messenger, a representative to speak for him.¹⁹ Moses cannot encounter God, directly, face to face and live. The writer to the Hebrews picks up on this theme when he observes that the new covenant is different to the old as it is not mediated by angels, although still accompanied by signs (Exodus 3:1-3).²⁰

As he draws near, God speaks to him. He tells him that this is holy ground so he is to respond with reverence and introduces himself as the God of Moses' ancestors: Abraham Isaac and Jacob. Moses has responded to God calling him by name by saying "Here am I" but he is afraid when he discovers that it is the Lord speaking to him. He hides his face (v4-6).

God tells Moses that he has seen the distress caused to his people and has heard their cry. So he has come to rescue them, to take them from slavery in Egypt, to Caanan, a land described as "flowing with milk and honey" to indicate its prosperity. The means by which he will accomplish this is to send Moses to speak to Pharaoh (v7-10)

Objections

Moses responds with two objections. First, who is he to speak to Pharaoh and then who is he to lead the people, what is he to say to them when they ask "who sent you", or in other words, on what authority. God responds by promising his presence with Moses when he appears before the King. In response to the question "Who shall I say sent me?" God responds "I am who I am." He is to tell them "I Am has sent me." God then tells Moses to say to the Israelites that it is the God of their forefathers: Abraham, Isaac and Jacob that has sent him. God introduces himself by the name YHWH, with the Hebrew seeming very similar to "I Am". In fact, rather than seeing the name YHWH as developing from "I am", given YHWH's use in Genesis, we might conclude that it is the statement "I am who I am" which is a play on the covenant name of YHWH. "I am who am" reflects the sense that God is self-existent and therefore not to be challenged or messed with (v11-17).

God now tells Moses to go first to the elders or tribal heads of Israel. He promises that they will listen to him even if Pharaoh won't. He says to start simply with a request to go three days into the desert to sacrifice. He knows that Pharaoh will even turn this small request down. God's plan is to bring his own strength against stubborn Pharaoh by afflicting the Egyptians with signs and wonders. The Egyptians will be favourable to the Israelites and so they will not leave Egypt empty-handed but blessed. There is an echo here from when Abram had gone down to Egypt

¹⁹ C.f. Enns, *Exodus*, 96.

²⁰ C.f. Hebrews 2.

with Sarai, claiming that she was his sister. God sent plagues against the Pharaoh then too, for taking Sarai into his harem. Furthermore, Abraham had left Egypt blessed with greater riches than he arrived with (v18-22).²¹

Signs and confirmation

Moses objects that the people will not listen to him or believe him (4:1). So God responds with a sign by turning Moses' staff into a snake. Moses runs away in fear from the snake but God tells him to catch it by its tail, a dangerous move, an act of faith because snakes can twist round to bite, you do better to grab them by the neck, so I'm told. However, as soon as Moses grabs the snake, it becomes his staff again (4:2-4). God says that this will be a sign that he has appeared to Moses. He then provides another sign by afflicting Moses' hand with leprosy and then curing it (v6-7). If they still don't believe Moses after a second sign, he is to take water from the Nile and pour it on the ground, it will become blood. Consider how Jesus echoes these signs in his ministry. We connect serpents with Satan from Genesis 3. Jesus is the one who has authority over the demons and so over Satan. Jesus was the one who came to heal lepers, making them clean. Jesus' first public sign, according to John was to turn water not into blood but into wine (v8-9).

Moses again protests, that he lacks eloquence. The apostle Paul would later also claim to lack rhetorical skill but this for him was not a limit to his ability to serve and speak for the Lord.²² God insists to Moses that this is no barrier, he is the one who gives speech, sight and hearing and it is for him alone to withhold it. He again exhorts Moses to go, promising his presence with him, just as Jesus would commission his disciples in Matthew 28:19ff to go and promise his presence with them and us (v10-12).

However, Moses continues to protest and begs God to send someone else. This causes God to be angry with him but still God provides for him. His brother, Aaron is already on his way to meet him and he will speak on Moses' behalf (v14-17).

Moses, then goes to tell his Father-in-law that he is returning to Egypt and leaves with his blessing (v18-20). God again speaks to Moses, telling him to perform the signs he has been shown in front of Pharaoh. However, God also warns Moses that the king will not listen and God will even harden his heart. Moses is to speak of Israel as God's firstborn son to Pharaoh., It is this image that Hosea 11:1 will pick up on and that Matthew will apply to Jesus (v21-23).

On the way back, Moses almost dies. God meets him and is ready to strike him down dead. It's a strange incident. We aren't explicitly told why this happens but there is a clue in that Moses' son needs to be circumcised. Perhaps this failure to keep the covenant reflects some of the half-heartedness Moses has about his people, God and his promises reflected in his attempts to refuse God's commission. We have seen that God has been angry at Moses over his answering back and stubbornness, a stubbornness that will later be seen in the people of Israel when they are in the wilderness. Zipporah circumcises their son and then touches Moses with the foreskin. This pre-echoes the Passover when a lamb's blood will protect the firstborn sons. This is significant in the context of God's words just above in the text about the firstborn son (v24-26).

²¹ Genesis 12:17-13:1.

²² 2 Corinthians 11:6.

Moses meets Aaron whom God has instructed to join with him. He reports everything to him. They then go to meet with the people together and demonstrate the signs. The people initially respond in belief (v27-31).

Zooming out

In Exodus 3-4, Moses finds himself in the very place that God is going to call him to lead the people out to. Moses must trace first the planned journey to Horeb or Sinai, there to meet the Lord God. He is the representative of his people.

Horeb is described as “Holy Ground”. In other words, this is God’s place. This is important because Moses isn’t just in exile from the promised land. He is in exile from exile. You might say that if NT Wright talks about the new creation as “life after life after death.” Then this mirrors that with “death after death.” Yet even here in the wilderness, God is present and so to be where God is means to be in his place.

Moses, represents God’s people, but he shows the same stubborn and disobedient streak that the people later will in the wilderness. He provokes God to anger just as the people will do. Yet, even so, God both provides for him with assurances, signs and his very name and protects him by demonstrating that neither snakes nor leprosy can destroy him. He provides someone to speak for him and on the road home provides protection for Moses against the danger of judgement.

All of this points to Jesus who will be the obedient and faithful firstborn son and leader of God’s people. Jesus’ sacrificial death will provide a blood covering for God’s people and first as “Emmanuel, God with us” Jesus will “pitch his tent among us”, making his presence, his place with humanity in our exile from God’s promises. Jesus would then send the Holy Spirit to be present with God’s people

Applying Exodus 3-4

There are lots of nuggets along the way in these two chapters. Particularly, I’m struck by the following. First of all, there is the example of Moses. It isn’t a good example here. He responds to God’s command and even to God’s promises with doubt and resistance. There is a particular warning for leaders in the church here. We cannot avoid that the church is likely to reflect in its culture what we are like in our own character and what our own family life looks like. This doesn’t mean though that responsibility falls solely on leaders but rather we bear greater responsibility.

Secondly, even through this, we see God’s provision to Moses of signs, his brother as a spokesman, assurance of his presence. God’s undeserved grace to us even in our wrestling and doubt is to be treasured. What signs of his grace are you seeing both in terms of his normal providence and supernatural interventions?

Thirdly, God meets Moses at the burning bush. First, Moses is drawn to the sign of a fire where the bush is not consumed. There’s a song lyric that has always jarred with me that asks God to “consume me from the inside out”. Pagan gods would consume human sacrifices and sadly cults and possessive people will also devour taking as much from you as they can. The sign was a declaration that it was possible to be in God’s presence and not get burnt. There is a way in which we can approach the holy and living God, through Christ. Even in the wilderness, there was holy ground. God was present with Moses in his exile and with the people in theirs. The

New Testament describes the church as “exiles” in the world. Yet we are never exiled away from God’s presence. He is with us through the Holy Spirit.

4 Confrontation of the gods

Let my people go

Moses and Aaron now go to address Pharaoh, as instructed, they tell him that YHWH-God commands him to let the Israelites go a three-day journey into the wilderness to celebrate a feast. The king's response is that he has not heard of this YHWH and he has no intention of letting his slaves off their labours. He concludes that life is too easy for them if they are getting such ideas. So, he instructs his task masters to withdraw the supply of straw that the Israelites mixed with mud-clay to make bricks. They will now have to work harder, gathering their own resources (Exodus 5:1-9).

The task-masters go back to the people with this message. Notice how the result is that they are "scattered" as they have to go searching for resources in the wider land. Pharaoh's aim is not only to keep them busy but to disrupt attempts for them to unite and come together. In that respect there are echoes of Babel when God scattered the peoples of the Earth. As with Moses' time in Midian, this represents an additional exile on top of the exile already experienced from the promised land (v10-14).

The Israelite foremen complain to Pharaoh about the harsh and unfair new conditions. However, his response is to accuse them of being idle. He reflects that this is why they want time off for a holiday in the desert. It seems that the Hebrew leaders had not been aware that Moses and Aaron were the cause of their latest oppression. They meet with Moses and Aaron afterwards and complain that they have kicked up a stink, offending Pharaoh. They call down God's judgement on Moses (v15-21).

Moses in turn complains to the Lord, expressing his regret that God had called him and that he had agreed. There is something Jonah-esq about his complaint and his reluctance to serve YHWH (v22). God's response is to reassure Moses that he will deliver the people, it will come to the point where Pharaoh will not merely allow them to leave but forcibly seek to drive them out (6:1).

God appears to Moses again, reminds him that he was with his ancestors and once again uses the covenant name, YHWH to identify himself. Whilst this name seems to have dated back to Genesis, God states that this wasn't the name that the patriarchs knew him by, not the name by which he revealed himself. It is here in God's act of deliverance that the name takes on its specific meaning.²³ Moses is also exhorted to go again and speak to the people, promising them that God will deliver them. However, this time, they do not want to listen (v2-9). Again, God sends Moses to Pharaoh and again Moses resists but God insists with a solemn charge (v10-13).

The author then provides us with Moses and Aaron's genealogy. We have had the genealogies of those who came into the land already. A new genealogy is a signal that these now are the ones that God is specifically dealing with and through at this time (v14-27). The section closes with a

²³ So, as Enns points out, it's not a new name but rather a fuller revelation of it. This also deals with any confusion over why God might seem to reveal the name to Moses twice, once in ch3 and once in ch 6. Chapter 6 can be seen as providing a refresher and an expansion on the revelation of the name's meaning. The name cannot of course have been a new name as then that would raise questions as to what purpose it served in reassuring the people that God had sent Moses. The point is that this name only makes sense in the context of God fulfilling his promises and rescuing his people. See Enns, *Exodus*, 173-174.

reminder of God's commission to Moses and his plea that he has "uncircumcised lips, a plea that will be echoed by Isaiah's exclamation that he had unclean lips (v28-30).

The judging of Egypt and Pharaoh

God sends Moses and Aaron back to Pharaoh with Aaron to act as Moses' spokesman just as prophets speak for God to the people. Again, he explains his plans and purpose to Moses. They are to call on Pharaoh to let the people go from Egypt but he will not, his heart will be hardened. This is because God's plan is to bring judgement on Pharaoh and Egypt before He delivers the people (Exodus 7:1-7).

On God's command, Moses and Aaron repeat the sign of the staff that turns into a snake, though this time, it's Aaron's staff that is used. In a manner reminiscent of those scientists who create viruses in laboratories, Pharaoh's magicians prove able to replicate the miracle but Aaron's serpent eats up the other snakes (v8-13).

Blood

Then God tells them to go back to meet Pharaoh again, taking the same staff with them. This time, they are to raise it over the river Nile and over other water sources such as irrigation canals and pools or reservoirs. This may mean that they visited each in turn or use the vantage point to point the staff towards representative water sources. God says that this is so Pharaoh may know that God is the true God. When they do this, the water in the Nile and other canals and waterways turns to blood and all the fish die. The result is that the river stinks, note the echo from Exodus 5:21 where the leaders of Israel complain that Moses and Aaron have caused them to stink to Pharaoh. Now, he has a real stench in his nostrils. Consider too how, the Nile had been a place of death to the Israelites, now it is a place of death to the Egyptians. Enns observes that this acts as a precursor to the death of the Egyptian army in the Red Sea,²⁴ However, the king's heart is hardening and instead of believing, he gets his own magicians to join in again, replicating the miracle.²⁵ Pharaoh pays no attention to what is happening. His heart is hardened not only to God and to the Hebrews but to the suffering that is coming upon his own people (v14-24). There is then a seven-day interval before Moses and Aaron go to see Pharaoh again (v25).

Frogs

God sends Aaron and Moses to perform another sign, the second plague. Again, Pharaoh is given the opportunity to let the people go to serve the Lord. He refuses, so Moses and Aaron stretch out the rod over the river Nile, canals and pools again. This time a plague of frogs come out from the waters infesting the homes of the Egyptians. Again the magicians replicate it (8:1-7).

Pharaoh pleads with Moses to bring an end to the plague and says he will let the people go in return. Moses says that he will, again this is so that Pharaoh may know who God is. He also allows Pharaoh to name the time when this is to happen. This will confirm that it is in response

²⁴ Enns, Exodus, 200.

²⁵ Enns asks where the water came from for the magicians to replicate this and whether there was drinking water for the Israelites. He notes that the Egyptians were able to dig for water so there still were water sources and the implication in the text seems to be that it was primarily the Egyptian water affected. Enns, Exodus, 202-203.

to Moses' prayer. However, as soon as the land is free from the frogs, Pharaoh hardens his heart and changes his mind (v8-15).

Gnats

The next plague is an infestation of gnats after Aaron strikes the dust of the ground with the staff. This time when the magicians attempt to replicate the plague they are unable to. This demonstrates that previously it has only been with God's permission that they have achieved it. They are forced to admit to Pharaoh that "this is the finger of God." Observe the imagery here, Scripture talks about God acting to save with a strong arm but his little finger (metaphorical) has enough power to destroy the power of Egypt. Pharaoh's heart remains hardened (v16-19).

Flies

Next, God sends a swarm of flies. The pattern is repeated with Moses and Aaron challenging Pharaoh to let the people go. God protects the land of Goshen where the Hebrews are from the plague. The magicians seem to make no effort to replicate this plague (v20-24).

Pharaoh calls Moses and Aaron in. He pleads with them to end the plague and attempts to negotiate. He will let them go a little way into the wilderness but not too far and not for too long. Moses intercedes. He requests two things, first that the plague will end, secondly that Pharaoh won't go back on his word this time. God answers the first part of the prayer but Pharaoh changes his mind again. His heart is being hardened, and this is the Lord's will and purpose (25-32).

Livestock die

Next, the Egyptians' livestock is killed but the Israelite animals live. The reference to "all" livestock seems to be a hyperbolic form of language as there is surviving cattle to face further plagues. I would suggest that the aim is to show the extent of the disaster both in that every flock or herd is affected and that a sizeable number of animals die.²⁶ Pharaoh still refuses to let the people go (9:1-7). Then Moses and Aaron throw soot in the air which becomes a fine dust spreading through the land causing the Egyptians' skin to break out into boils. The magicians suffer from the boils too so are not even able to come out and stand and face of against Moses (v8-13).

Hailstorm

The seventh plague is a fierce and deadly hailstorm. God points out through Moses that he is showing restraint, he could have used these plagues to wipe out the Egyptians but has chosen not to because his aim is to show his glory. Those who are ready to listen heed the warning and bring their remaining livestock inside (v13-21). Moses stretches out his hand and there is hail and lightning. Again, Goshen is protected (v22-26).

In his response this time, Pharaoh again pleads for respite but goes further in acknowledging he has sinned. Moses however says that he knows this isn't true repentance and that Pharaoh will not change. As expected, when God ends the judgement, Pharaoh still refuses to let the people go (v27-35).

²⁶ See also Enns, *Exodus*, 217. Alexander allows for this possibility too but notes that some commentators see a distinction between animals in the field and those not whilst others consider that the Egyptians may have replenished their flocks from the Israelites' herds. See Alexander, *Exodus*, 185.

Locusts

God explains to Moses that he has hardened Pharaoh's heart and the purpose of this is that the judgement will be memorable so that Moses and the people will be able to talk about it and it will be passed on down the generations (10:1-3). Moses again appears before Pharaoh and challenges him with the question "when will you humble yourself before God?" This time Moses warns of a coming plague of locusts. Pharaoh again negotiates. He will let the men go but not the women. Moses and Aaron are dismissed, pushed out the door (v3-6).

Darkness

When Moses stretches out his rod, an east wind brings in the locust swarm. When Pharaoh pleads for forgiveness and admits to sin, Moses at the Lord's command stretches out his rod again and a west wind drives the swarm into the red sea, just as Moses and Aaron had been driven out of the court. Indeed, the imagery is poetic here. The Egyptians regarded the Israelites like a plague of locusts and now God is willing to send them out, his wind will drive them into and through the red sea out of Egypt. Once again Pharaoh hardens his heart (v12-20).

The penultimate plague is pitch darkness throughout the land. Pharaoh offers to let the people go but insists they leave their livestock behind. Moses points out that without animals there can be no sacrifices. Pharaoh's heart is hardened again. This time he insists Moses leave and not return on pain of death (v21-29).

The Firstborn

God announces to Moses that there is just one more plague to come and then Pharaoh will let the people go (Exodus 11:1). Before he announces the plague, Moses instructs the Israelites to go and request silver and gold from the Egyptians. YHWH ensures that the people find favour with the Egyptians and additionally, Moses now has a fearsome reputation as well due to the signs (v2-3).

Moses delivers the final message to Pharaoh. The firstborns will die but the Israelites will be protected. Moses tells Pharaoh that the end result will be his servants begging Israel to go. Moses is described as leaving Pharaoh's palace in "hot anger". We are not told what causes this anger. Is it wrath at the wickedness and hardness of Pharaoh that has brought things to this point or is it anger at the king's unstated but implied response, his continuing stubbornness? I suspect the latter given that God tells Moses again that the king will not listen (v4-9).

The author sums up the cycle of plagues here observing that Moses and Aaron perform all these signs but Pharaoh does not relent. The reason being that God has hardened his heart (v10).

God then sets out instructions for the Israelites. Whilst again, they are to be shielded from the plague, this time they are to take responsibility for some aspects of the protection. They are instructed to take a lamb or young goat on the tenth of the month, kill it, roast it and eat it at twilight on the 14th day. Instructions are given for the meal, and the people are to eat together in households (combining smaller households). They are to be dressed ready for the journey ahead. The blood from the animal is to be sprinkled on the doorposts of the house as a sign that they are there. The Lord will pass over that house, and the firstborn will be spared (v7-13).

The people are also instructed to commemorate the day annually as a memorial. They will do this by re-enacting the meal including eating only unleavened bread for several days as a reminder of preparing bread in a hurry for a journey. This will have been the bread used by Jesus

in the last supper. Strikingly, a failure to observe this element and by bringing leaven into the home is considered a serious matter which will cut you off from God's people ((v14-28).

At midnight, God brings death to Egypt and all the first born sons die, including Pharaohs. The King summons Mosen and Aaron, now urging them to go and take all their livestock with them, he begs a blessing from them as they go. In other words, he is looking for them to lift the curse that is over him and Egypt (v29-32).

The Israelites set out. There are 600,000 men plus women and children. They have prepared unleavened bread in a hurry to take with them (it's only at this stage that the symbolic festival bread is explained). They are described as a mixed company indicating that other ethnic tribes join with them, perhaps other slave workers who have been subdued by the Egyptians plus also sympathetic Egyptians. They have done as instructed and gathered gold and silver. They had been in Egypt for 430 years.

The author or editor adds a note here to explain another aspect of Passover observation. Part of the festival was a night vigil because God had watched over them that night. This is fascinating when we consider that Jesus after the last supper went to Gethsemane to watch and pray and asked his disciples to do this with him (v33-42).

We are reminded again that the Lord institutes the Passover feast. Further he insists that this feast is specifically for God's people. Slaves who have been brought in and have no option but to be there may participate in the meal but this is not for foreigners passing through, those who sojourn in the land. If they wish to participate, they must first be circumcised.²⁷

The response to the salvation of Israel's firstborns is that the people are now to consecrate the firstborn sons. This is the obligation that Mary and Joseph fulfil with Jesus in Luke 2:22-38 when they meet Simeon and Anna (Exodus 13:1).

Moses now introduces and gives details for a second festival, closely related to the festival of the Passover, The Feast of Unleavened Bread. This has already been alluded to in the previous chapter. For seven days, each year at this time, the people will only eat unleavened bread. They are to tell their children that they are doing this in order to remember when God brought them out of Egypt. "it shall be to you as a sign on your hand and as a memorial between your eyes, that the law of the Lord may be in your mouth. For with a strong hand the Lord has brought you out of Egypt".²⁸ In other words, this will be a vivid, immediate, in your face reminder. Note the connection here with Torah, God's Law which they would later also be encouraged to place in the same visible manner as a reminder (v2-10).²⁹

Additionally, when they reach the land, they are to consecrate the firstborns again both sons and livestock. This seems to be something that will be repeated. They are to be ready to answer

²⁷ Note, there has been a tendency to assume that the repetition of instructions about the festivals reflects editing and incorporation of various sources. It is possible that the author structures the account logically to include later commentary, just as the Gospel accounts do not stick to strict chronology and especially John incorporates authorial commentary. However, there is no reason to presume that Moses did not use the opportunity at the time to instruct for the future, although the hasty departure may suggest that detail followed later. On sources see e.g. Alexander, *Exodus*, 246.

²⁸ Verse 9.

²⁹ See also Deuteronomy 6:8 and 11:18. Alexander agrees that this is intended metaphorically. The Jewish tradition of wearing phylacteries (little boxes containing words from the Torah) dates only as far back as the Babylonian exile. See Alexander, *Exodus*, 257.

their children's questions again using a similar formula. The formula of a witness between their eyes is used again (v11-16).

Defeat and judgement for the Egyptian gods

The plagues unleashed against Pharaoh and Egypt may also be seen as Yahweh's triumph over the gods of Egypt. Like most ancient civilisations, Egypt was polytheistic. The plagues can each be seen as portraying a direct confrontation with those gods.³⁰ Serpents were of course seen as sacred to many cultures and we might trace back a link to Genesis 3 where Satan takes the form of a serpent to tempt Adam and Eve.³¹ The Serpent of course was cast down to crawl on the dust of the ground. Moses and Aaron cast down their rods onto the ground which become serpents, crawling in the dust. If a poisonous snake such as a cobra, this would have been a frightening sight but ultimately the serpent is under God's authority through his servants.

Egyptians saw the River Nile as the source of life and worshipped the associated god, Heti. However, the Nile has become a place of danger and death to the Israelites and now is made a place of death to the Egyptians too. Kek, a frog headed god was believed to be married to the serpent headed goddess Kauket. Together they represented night and day, or in his case, primordial darkness. A land overrun with frogs was a land slipping back into that darkness.

There were gods of the fertile ground (Horus) and of the desert (Seti) and we can see their judgement in the plagues that bring gnats, flies and boils from the dust. Seti is also associated with storms and chaos. Hamilton observes:

The plague of hail comes on "so you may know there is none like me in all the earth" (9:14), and "so you may know the earth is the LORD's" (9:29).³²

God brings darkness onto the land, the Sun is eclipsed, Ra, the Sun-God defeated. Pharaoh himself was worshipped as a deity but he was not safe from God's judgement as his firstborn died.

The plagues also bring Pharaoh's magicians out into the open and expose their powerlessness. They are able to replicate miracles to a limited extent but not able to restore things to right. All that they can do is add to the destruction. The magicians were not mere court entertainers but would have fulfilled a priestly role, drawing their believed powers from the gods. Were they simply clever fakers, conjurors or were they relying on demonic power to replicate the plagues? We are not told this. However, one thing is for certain, they could only do anything with YHWH's permission.

De-creation

³⁰ For further information on the gods mentioned below and more, see [Ancient Egyptian gods and goddesses | British Museum](#)

³¹ Out of interest, Hamilton observes that in "7:9. The Hebrew word for "serpent" (and in vv. 10, 12 [plural]) is not nāḥāš as in 4:3-4 (Moses throws his staff on the ground and it becomes a nāḥāš), but tannîn.

Hamilton, Victor P.. Exodus: An Exegetical Commentary (p. 214). Baker Publishing Group. Kindle Edition. This may be simply vocabulary variation but it may also be intentional with the Greek equivalent being "drakkon" similar to "dragon".

³² Hamilton, Victor P.. Exodus: An Exegetical Commentary (p. 226). Baker Publishing Group. Kindle Edition.

In Genesis 6-9, we see that God's judgement on a sinful and wicked world is also an act of de-creation. Where the creation of Genesis 1-2 had seen forming and structure so that light was divided from darkness and sea from land and sky, we see a descent into chaos as the form and structure is lost, the waters merge in together. We see something similar here. We may view Egypt as a mini world, or creation. This was the world created by powers, hostile to God. Not only did Egyptians have their own creation myths and believe that their gods were responsible, in reality, it was a world formed and structured around that ideology.

The plagues involve a breaching of boundaries, water animals break out onto the land, there is no separation. Clean is contaminated by unclean. Darkness returns, extinguishing light. The Egyptian world is unmade.

Creation was about life, not only was the world structured but God filled it with living beings. The Flood brought death on the earth. The Exodus plagues bring death too. The fish in the Nile die, livestock is killed, locusts devour plant life and finally the firstborn sons die.

Enns puts it this way:

“Creation is at God's command both to deliver his people and destroy his enemies. The plagues are creation reversals. Animals harm rather than serve humanity, light ceases and darkness takes over, waters become a source of death rather than life, the climax of Genesis 1 is the creation of humans on the last day, whereas the climax of the plagues is the destruction of human beings in the last plague.”³³

The Firstborn's significance

De-creation finishes with the death of the firstborns. Recreation can be seen as the fruit of the true and better firstborn's coming. It is significant that God chooses to strike down the firstborn sons. Israel is referred to as YHWH's Son by the prophet Hosea.³⁴ Pharaoh seeks to destroy God's first-born so God kills the firstborns of Egypt. Jesus is described as the first born and moreover as God's only begotten son. He will use the Passover meal before his death to present himself as the one whom the meal points to. He is the substitute who bears the death penalty on the Cross, just like the lamb in the Passover meal took the place of the sons.

Whilst God protects Israel from the plagues, it is fascinating that on this specific occasion he requires the Israelites to do something. The killing of the lamb and smearing of its blood represents a sacrifice that covers them, offering shelter, turning away God's wrath. Ezekiel 20:4-10 tells us that the Israelites were not innocent and blameless. They had entered into idolatry, worshipping Egyptian gods. Atonement was needed.³⁵ They deserved death as well. As Alexander observes:

Israelites were inherently no different from the male firstborn of the Egyptians. Without the atoning blood of the sacrifice, they too would have been struck dead by the destroyer.”³⁶

³³ Enns, Exodus, 231.

³⁴ Hosea 11:1.

³⁵ C.f. Jeffrey, Ovey and Sach, Pierced For Our Transgressions, 34-38

³⁶ Alexander, “The Passover sacrifice”, Pages 1-24 in Roger T Bexkwith and Martin J Selman (eds), *Sacrifice in the Bible* (Carlisle. Paternoster, Baker. Grand Rapids, MI.: 1995), 17.

The requirement for a communal meal and insistence that the memorial was only for the circumcised reminds us that this was also about declaring themselves part of the covenant people and therefore under the protection of God's covenant.

Where are God's people?

The plagues, marking out the land and the people of Egypt for curse rather than blessing is a fulfilment of Genesis 12:1-3. God had promised that those who blessed Abraham and his offspring would be blessed and so it had been the case when Joseph came down to Egypt. He had also warned that those who cursed Abraham and his offspring would be cursed. The Egyptians are marked out as not God's people and the land as not the place of his presence and blessing. Of course, God was present there and rules over all but here to punish and destroy instead of the bless, rule and protect.

Yet, the people of Israel are kept safe. They are God's people and they are enjoying his provision and protection as he steps in to deliver them. Goshen becomes to them a mini Canaan or Eden, home away from home. There they find shelter.

Magicians and Miracles

Why were the Egyptian magicians seemingly able to replicate the miracles that Moses performed? There are a few possibilities. It could be that they were dependent on demonic power. Paul tells us in 1 Corinthians that there is real demonic power that sits behind idolatry. Alternatively, it may have been that they were tricksters, their miracles fake. It has been suggested that they had a trick where they got real snakes to become rigid before releasing them. Perhaps similar explanations lie behind the other replicated signs. Finally, we might observe that God was sovereignly permitting these things to happen.

This is helpful because it enables us to think through how we assess situations. How do we know if a particular movement is of God? For example, the Bethel movement linked to the church in Redding, CA has caused much controversy in recent year. Some consider Bethel to be just a cult and a con-show. Others argue that even if there are questions and issues, the presence of reported supernatural manifestations, healings, resurrections and deliverances must mean that God's presence is there.

Now, it is possible that you have a church of fallible human beings but God is still at work there. However, we must surely allow for the possibility that signs, if we don't want to go so far as calling them demonic, might be fake. It is worth remembering that the miracles remain uncorroborated, that natural explanations exist for phenomena such as glory clouds and that sadly some signs such as prophetic words given have been proven to be false. The jury is at best out.

So, how do we know if something is from the Lord. Well Paul in 1 Corinthians 12 tells us to discern the spirits. A false spirit points away from Jesus, dishonours him makes his name cursed. The true Spirit reveals Jesus as Lord, honours and glorifies him. That's why when I did a deep dive into Bethel, I focused on what they believed and taught.³⁷ However, our focus should not be so much on assessing the latest spiritual fad but checking our own hearts and actions.

Applying Exodus 5-13

³⁷ <https://faithrootcom.wordpress.com/wp-content/uploads/2026/03/bethel-the-deep-dive-2a.pdf>

These themes help us to apply the signs, wonders and plagues to our context. There is of course much to learn along the way. Paul in Romans 9:14-18 will pick up on the hardness of Pharaoh's heart. There is a warning of course not to allow our hearts to become hard and resistance to God's command and calling. The focus in Romans though is on God's sovereignty, his right to choose whom he will show compassion and mercy to and to choose to use some to show his power and justice.

We learn to apply the Old Testament through Jesus. Jesus was of course the fulfilment of the promise to Eve in Genesis 3 that one would come who was the serpent crusher. It is Jesus who has the authority over the serpent. We see God's victory over all other god's and powers in Jesus' victory at the Cross. The Cross at one level looks like de-creation. Jesus enters into that place of curse. Water and blood are mingled, darkness falls, the firstborn dies. Yet there is re-creation in the resurrection, day light, the rising sun and the rising Son with life again as the tomb is emptied.

This draws us to the question "where are we in the story?" As Gentile believers, we were not God's people and Ephesians 2 tells us that we were "far off" we were not in the place of God's presence, protection and provision. We were cursed, we deserved death, just like the Egyptians. However, there is a hint of something in the description of the people as a mixed body, others joined themselves to Israel. Christ's death and resurrection was not just in the place of Israel but in my place and your place too. We are ingrafted in, joined to God's people (Romans 11).

5 Crossing over

A long cut

The quickest route out of Egypt would have been directly out of Goshen and then the coast route around the edge of the Mediterranean but that would have taken the people through Philistine territory. God recognises that this will bring them into open conflict early on and at this stage the people may be tempted to retreat back to Egypt (Exodus 13:17). Instead, the Lord leads the people southwards and through the wilderness, bringing them alongside a different sea, literally, “the reed sea”, which has traditionally been considered to be the Red Sea. Contemporary scholarship tends to presume that this is not the Red Sea. The word *suph* is borrowed from ancient Egyptian and refers to papyrus reeds. Alexander argues that the reference is to freshwater marshes further north than the Red Sea where reeds were not present.³⁸ This of course leaves questions concerning the description of the later miracle which we will come to. Hamilton on the other hand supports the traditional view and cites Batto in support.

“At no period in Israelite history is there any evidence that *yam sūp* ever referred to a body of water other than the Red Sea. . . . There is no reason whatever to posit the existence of a second *yam sūp*. In short, the hypothesis that the Israelites experienced deliverance . . . at some historical body of water . . . accurately preserved as the ‘Reed Sea,’ should be laid to rest forever. Requiescat in pace!”³⁹

Perhaps the description of the sea as a “reed sea” was not so much a description of the plant life growing there as to the shape of the sea. It is important also to consider how the translation “Red Sea” came into usage. It is not the case that it was a simple mistranslation in either the Latin Vulgate or the King James version. Rather, the Septuagint translators suggested that it was the Red Sea, this despite being based in Alexandria, Egypt, close to potential reedy marshland options. They must therefore have had their reasons for their choice. New Testament authors such as Luke in Acts 7 also follow the Septuagint in assuming that Moses took the Israelites across the Red Sea.⁴⁰ One might argue that the spurs of the Red Sea into the Sinai Peninsula do have a reedy feel. They leave in “battle formation”, this might suggest that the fighting aged men were prepared and ready to respond to attack, though questions arise about where they obtained weapons from. Enns suggests that this is simply a reference to leaving in an orderly fashion (v18).⁴¹

Moses fulfilled the vow that Joseph had requested of his people that when the time came to return to the land, they would bring his bones with them and his body would not be left in exile (v19). YHWH himself leads them and manifests his presence by a pillar of cloud that at night takes on the appearance of burning fire (v20-22).

The trap is set

God tells Moses to get the people to turn back on their route and camp. The aim is to give the impression that trapped by the sea, they are simply wandering in circles. God has not finished

³⁸ Alexander, *Exodus*, 264.

³⁹ Batto, (1983, 35), cited in Hamilton, Victor P. *Exodus: An Exegetical Commentary* (p. 355). Baker Publishing Group. Kindle Edition.

⁴⁰ [In My View the Biblical Sea of Reeds is the Red Sea | Bible Interp](#)

⁴¹ Enns, *Exodus*, 270.

with the Egyptians yet and so his plan is to continue to harden Pharaoh's heart and draw him out to pursue the Israelites (Exodus 14:1-5). This is exactly what happens. Pharaoh changes his mind again and sets off with his charioteers in pursuit (v5-9). At the first sight of trouble, the Israelites turn on Moses, grumbling and complaining. They knew that this was going to happen and that's why they had wanted him to leave them alone in Egypt. This proves that God's reasoning when not taking them up through Philistine territory is proved correct. This way though, they cannot turn back because they are trapped between the sea and the Egyptian army (v10-12).

The reason that God has not finished with Pharaoh is that once again he is going to demonstrate to the Israelites his power and sovereignty. The signs and miracles turn out to be as much for this audience, God's people as it is for God's enemies to warn and judge them. Moses tells the Israelites not to be afraid but to stand firm and watch. They will see God deliver them. YHWH will fight for them (v13-14).

See what God will do

God asks Moses, "why are you crying out?" The sense is "are you going to trust me and follow my lead? There's no need for panic." He tells Moses to get the people to instruct the people to break camp. Moses is to lift up his staff and stretch his hand out over the water. He promises that he will divide the water so the people can pass through on dry land. He also says that he will continue to harden the Egyptian army's hearts so they pursue the Israelites into the sea and are drowned. He says that he will "receive glory" and the Egyptians will know that he is the Lord. There are echoes of this in John 11:40 when before Jesus raises Lazarus, he says to Martha "Didn't I tell you that if you believed you would see the glory of God?" (Exodus 14:15-18)

The pillar of cloud representing the angel of the Lord's presence moves to the rear of the Israelites creating a barrier between them and the Egyptians. Notice again that there is a movement between referring to the Lord's presence directly and seeing it as mediated by an angel (v19-20)].

Moses stretches out his hand and God sends an easterly wind that blows across the sea. The waters are driven back and bank up. The Israelites are able to cross on dry land (v21-22). The Egyptians pursue after but the chariot wheels stick and swerve. The Egyptians see that God is at work and want to turn back to put distance between them and the Israelites (v23-25). The Israelites reach the other shore and God tells Moses once again to stretch his hand out. The waters then collapse back down onto the Egyptian army, drowning them (v26-28).

The author sums up that YHWH delivered Israel from the Egyptians. This caused the Israelites to fear and believe in YHWH and trust Moses (v29-30).

The horse and his rider

The response of the people is to sing praise to God (v1a). The immediate cause of their rejoicing is the deliverance they have specifically witnessed in the destruction of the Egyptian army. This is poetically expressed as "The horse and his rider, he has thrown into the sea (v1b). The front ending of the horse and rider in the syntax sets up a parallel. They are thrown into the sea, they are weak, impotent, defeated. By contrast, the Lord is their strength. It's him they sing about because he is their saviour. So, they praise God, the one who has been their father's God, a reminder of covenant promises but also their own God (v2). God is described as "a man of war." This is recognition that he fights for Israel. His covenant name "YHWH" is declared (v3).

The next section opens with a repetition concerning the horse and rider, or the charioteers. Along with the generals of Pharaoh's army, they have been drowned (v4-5). It is YHWH who has done this. His "right arm" acts as an anthropomorphism for strength and power (v6). The destruction of God's enemies glorify him and show off his power (v7). God is portrayed as himself breathing over the waters in order to control them, dividing them, bringing them together again upon the Egyptians. The miracle is a result of his effortless power (v8-10). God is incomparable and without rival. This again is demonstrated by his effortless control over nature that brings defeat on the enemies of God's people (v11-12).

The next section of the song begins with a description of how God has led his own chosen people, there is the impact that his strength and power has on them, bringing salvation and guidance (v13-14). However, the affect on Israel's future neighbours, Philistia, Edom and Moab as well as the Canaanites is to cause them to fear and tremble. Assuming that this represents the original words of the song, then the naming of those nations is prophetic, describing the report reaching them that Yahweh is coming, bringing his people.⁴² However, it also functions as a comparison of Israel to the nations around them at later dates. The past events shape present faith and present fear/weakness (v14-18).

The author reminds us again that the reason for praise is that God had rescued the people and delivered them from the Egyptians (v19). He also describes how Miriam leads out the women to play music on tambourines and to dance. Miriam is herself, along with Moses and Aaron identified as a prophet, someone speaking for God (v20). Miriam also leads in singing the song, indicated by the summary of its key lines (v21).

Baptism

In 1 Corinthians 10:1-2, Paul writes:

"For I do not want you to be unaware, brothers,^[a] that our fathers were all under the cloud, and all passed through the sea,² and all were baptized into Moses in the cloud and in the sea,

Notice the link that Paul makes with baptism here. This does not seem to be a novel concept on his part. Jewish conversion ceremonies for Gentiles seem to have included a form of baptism as well as circumcision. Baptism was therefore not a novel act when John called people to repentance in the wilderness. The people of Israel had crossed over two bodies of water and we might assume that God intentionally led the people by the way of the Jordan to repeat the original miracle so that the new generation who were not at the Red Sea might experience the same miracle and be baptised into God's people. In that sense, it was not shocking that you needed to come through water to benefit from the covenant. What was shocking was that Jews were being required to go through this ceremony to essentially bring them in from the outside.

Now, it is worth noting two things. First, that for Paul, the baptism at the Red Sea was into Moses. It's into the covenant that will be established at Sinai. The people are expressing trust in Moses, God's representative. Secondly, that this baptism did them no good. This reminds us

⁴² See Hamilton, Victor P.. Exodus: An Exegetical Commentary (p. 394). Baker Publishing Group. Kindle Edition.

first that the Law was weak and unable to save but secondly that baptism disconnected from fruit of repentance is no good.

Applying Exodus 14-15

Once again we can see the themes of God's people in God's place under God's provision and protection at work. God is present with the people, They are under the cloud which leads, provides a way and protects. So wherever YHWH or his angel is can be considered God's place. The inclination of the people is to fear but they are called to stand still and to trust God. They go through the sea but on dry ground. Praise comes in response to deliverance by the God who fights for his people.

Here is a reminder of God's grace to us. We can be caught up in busyness as we seek to solve problems and captured by fear of our circumstances. However, we have a God who intervenes for us. We are not brought out of the trial but delivered safely through it.

Primarily this points us to the way that God in Christ has delivered us from sin and death to life in Christ. This should be our first cause of praise. However, we may also see how God is at work as we first stand still and then step out in faith into different circumstances.

6 A hungry and thirsty people

Bitter-Sweet

As the people move on from the Red Sea crossing, they search for water but find none in the desert for three days, until they come to a place they name Marah, the name is a play on the Hebrew for bitter. There is something off about the water, it tastes bitter. The people begin to grumble, “what are we going to drink now?” They demand of Moses. Under YHWH’s guidance he throws a log into the water and the people find that they can drink it, the bitter water has become sweet (Exodus 15: 22-25a).

This is described as both a test from God, to see how they will respond and a statute, before Sinai, God is giving the people commands which make practical and personal his covenant with them. In this case, it is a command with a conditional promise. If they prove faithful and obedient to the Lord and his laws, then he will be their healer and keep them from the diseases that the Egyptians were afflicted with (v25b-26). They then move on to an oasis named Elim. There they provide an abundance of shade/shelter and water (v27).

Grumbling, testing and the glory of God

The people journey out into the desert toward Sinai and away from Elim. They begin to grumble about hunger and lack of food. They fondly remember easy provision of meat and bread in Egypt though they seem to forget their harsh treatment as slaves (Exodus 16:1-3).

God tells Moses to gather the people together because he is about to “rain down” an abundance of bread. This will test the faithfulness of the people because they will need to trust God’s daily provision by collecting enough for one day at a time except for the day before the Sabbath when they are to collect enough food for two days. Hamilton observes:

To complain about the lack of drinkable water or a morsel of bread or meat in such unforgiving and inhospitable surroundings is not to quibble about nonnecessities or luxuries. Israel finds itself in another life-and-death situation. This time the threat is not from the Egyptian behemoth, but from potential life-sapping thirst and starvation, to say nothing of roving bands of desert robbers who would find vulnerable Israelites and anything they had with them an easy “take” (18:8-16). In such circumstances, can the God who has pulverized the Egyptians be trusted to be a God capable of providing for the basic survival needs of the Hebrews and protecting them from assault?⁴³

Now, it is possible that the pre-prepared unleavened bread was beginning to run out but we were told back in Exodus 13:38 that:

“³⁸ A mixed multitude also went up with them, and very much livestock, both flocks and herds.

In other words, there was a supply of food. However, perhaps it would not be so easy for a people on the move to prepare bread. It seems that there wasn’t a shortage of meat but perhaps that did not seem as rich and as civilised a diet as they were used to. It does seem to be less about immediate peril and more about the inconvenience of being a people on the move that causes them to grumble. That being so, it is perhaps telling that what God offers in the form

⁴³ Hamilton, Victor P.. Exodus: An Exegetical Commentary (pp. 402-403). Baker Publishing Group. Kindle Edition.

of manna and later in the chapter quails remains essentially travel food. Will they be satisfied with his provision? Are they content to be a people on the move? Maybe too, there is fear of the unknown ahead. Yes, they have provisions for now but will they survive the harshness of the wilderness ahead? Will what they have be enough. Moreover, can God be enough for them? Again the nature of the provision tests that trust on God's provision of what they need, day to day (v4-5).

Moses and Aaron assemble the people. They challenge them over their grumbling, making it clear that they are complaining against God, not simply their human leaders. They promise them that they will now see the Lord's glory. They will receive bread in the morning and meat in the evening from God (v6-8).

Heaven sent food

In the evening a flock of quail descend on the camp providing meat. The next morning, a flake like substance has settled on the ground. The people gather this to eat. It doesn't matter how much they gather, all end up with just the right amount. Some do not follow Moses' instructions and save some for the next day but it became worm infested. On the sixth day, some do not follow the instruction to collect double. They go out the next day expecting to find some and there is none (v13-30)

We are then given a bit more information about the "bread", it's described as white, looking like coriander seeds and tasting like honey. They call it "manna" which has the sense of "what is this?" Moses tells the people that a measure of it is to be kept to help future generations remember what God has done for them. Aaron is to place this in the presence of the Lord, a reference to a later moment when it will be placed in the ark of the covenant. This is the food that the Israelites will eat for the next forty years as they wander in the wilderness (v31-36).

Food, faithfulness and covenant

Moses links up the attitude of the people to food with covenant faithfulness and unfaithfulness. This is brought home by the fact that some of the manna is kept and placed symbolically in the Lord's presence, eventually in the ark of the covenant. The food represents testing and how the people respond. The grumbling here is an act of disobedience because they have already seen God's ability to miraculously supply and they should have had plenty of resources with them coming out of Egypt.

God's provision echoes the provision of fruit in the Garden of Eden. God provides abundantly, a food that "rains down". At the same time, he places boundaries around the provision to foster trust. As in Genesis 3, some of the people do not trust and so over step the boundaries or fail to heed God's instructions. We see people seeking to be in control but we also see them looking to rely on God without following his ways or listening carefully to his words. There are warnings for us here.

For those who failed to collect enough food for the Sabbath, the day becomes a fast day. They of course will not suffer, it is perfectly possible to survive one day. Furthermore, as we have noted, they have livestock but to kill and eat will come at a cost as they will have to take from their own flocks. An aspect of fasting may be to remind us of how disobedience leads to loss.

Water from the rock

The assembly continue to journey. They are now suffering a water shortage. This is perhaps a greater threat than the problem they had with a lack of bread. Again, they grumble to Moses. They complain that they have been brought out into the desert to die. Moses cries out to God, he too fears for his life believing the people will rise up and kill him (Exodus 17:1-3)

God commands Moses to take his staff and strike a rock. Drinking water comes from the rock when he does. Note that the rock is described as “at Horeb”. This is the place where God will give his law (v4-7).

Enemies defeated

The Amalekites come and attack the Israelites. Moses senses Joshua to fight them. Meanwhile, he goes up the mountain to intercede, raising his hands. When his hands are raised, the Israelites prevail but when he weakens and drops his arms, the Amalekites gain the upper hand. Aaron and Hur who have accompanied Moses find a rock for him to sit on and then they support his arms until victory is won. Moses’ raised hands and staff are a visible pointer to the fact that it is God who wins the victory.⁴⁴ God allows this trust in him and its consequences to be played out visibly and this is surely another reminder that the people are not to test him (Exodus 17:8-13).

Moses is instructed by YHWH to write down the events in a book. Specifically, he is to record that the Amalekites have become an ongoing enemy of Israel until they are blotted out. Moses builds an altar to the Lord not just to remember the battle but also as a witness to this promise and judgement on Amalek (v14-16).

The God who provides and protects

If Exodus is about God’s people in God’s place under God’s rule experiencing his provision and protection, then here we see the emphasis on God’s rule, his protection and provision. We may also see a chiasm in play here going back to the destruction of the Egyptian army.

A God delivers Israel from their enemy

B God provides water to drink

C God feeds his people

B God provides water to drink

A God delivers Israel from their enemy

Further, we may also see a repeating pattern of God providing food, drink and protection going back to the Passover meal. The image of the people eating and drinking before Amalek attack reminds us as well of how God the good shepherd feeds his people in the presence of their enemies (Psalm 23).

We can also see echoes of Eden here. Just as there was an enemy in the garden in Genesis 3, so too here after being provided with abundant food and with boundaries, the people are under attack. Amalek becomes identified with the seed of the serpent. Just as there will be a generational struggle leading to the defeat of the Serpent, so too with the Amalekites.

⁴⁴ See Alexander, *Exodus*, 339.

Organisation

Moses' father in law, Jethro comes to meet him with Zipporah, Moses' wife and their sons. Moses had sent his family back to stay with Jethro.⁴⁵ Moses reports back to his Father in Law all that has happened and this causes Jethro to acknowledge YHWH as God and offer him sacrifices (Exodus 18:1-12).

Jethro observes Moses as he seeks to lead the people, making judgements between them, hearing their concerns, giving advice. He offers Moses advice. He encourages him to divide the people up into families, clans and tribes and appoint people under him to judge and lead the groups. Moses should only allow the matters of greater importance or most difficult cases to come to him (v13-22). Moses follows the advice (v24-27).

Wise advice or something more?

There was certainly wisdom in what Jethro had to say and Moses did well to follow it. We can also pick up on the wisdom when we consider church leadership. Church leaders have found it helpful as churches grow to broaden their leadership teams by bringing on additional staff and elders. Small groups (home groups, life groups, community groups, whatever you call them) help organise people so that they can receive appropriate pastoral care as well as disciple one another. This can help protect pastors from becoming over burdened and burnt out.

Furthermore, there are lessons about justice and impartiality here. Alexander writes:

“Building on all that is said in this chapter, Christians should be active in promoting judicial systems that are free from corruption. Those appointed to judge should not be swayed by personal financial gain.”⁴⁶

However, the context of these events might be drawing us to something else. As much as Moses sought to love, serve and lead the people, he was limited and needed to make accommodations. This contrasts with God's effortless ability to cope with the complaints of the people, to see their needs, to provide for them, refresh them and protect them. Furthermore, the meeting with Jethro will be followed by Moses going up the mountain to receive God's Law. More than a man, the people need to hear God's Words, to know him and obey him. Even still, the Law must come through weak, limited Moses as mediator. Something, or someone better is still needed and awaited.

Jesus, the true and better Moses

Better than the people coming to Moses with all their worries and questions will be a system that enables others to exercise leadership and justice. Better than this will be for the people to have heard and to know the Law of God for themselves. Even better still will be when they have the law written on their hearts when the true and better Moses comes.

Jesus is the true and better Moses. Yes, he will organise his people, appointing the twelve apostles. Those apostles will themselves recognise their own limited capacity and appoint deacons. However, Jesus has all authority and is with us through the Holy Spirit. The New Testament points us to Jesus as the rock through whom we receive the living water of life when we fear death (John 7). Jesus not only gave bread to the multitudes but announced that he is the bread of life (John 6). Jesus is the one who on the Cross disarmed and defeated the enemy.

⁴⁵ Note elsewhere Jethro is known as Ruel.

⁴⁶ Alexander, *Exodus*, 354.

Just as one day, Amalek would be blotted out, so Jesus fulfils the promise that one would come who would crush the serpent's head.

7 The Law

Sinai

It's two months after the Israelites have left Egypt when they arrive at Sinai. The people camp around the mountain and Moses climbs up to appear before YHWH (Exodus 19:1-3a). God speaks to Moses and gives instructions to the people. The context is that they have seen what God did to the Egyptians, punishing and defeating them as well as what God did for them, rescuing them. The image of being lifted and carried by God as though carried by an eagle is a strong motif in the Old Testament (v3b-4). In the light of this, God calls them to obey him and to keep his covenant, they are shortly to be told what this entails (v5a). God's promise is that if they do this, they will be his treasured possession, set apart and special to him as royal priests (v6).

Moses reports this to the elders of the people who indicate their willingness to agree. Note the indication is that it is all the people who agree whether this is because the message is passed on or because the elders are seen as representative (v7-8). God is going to come to Moses in a manifest, visible and audible manner. He will come in a thick cloud and speak in an audible voice to enable the people to trust Moses' claims. (v9).

After Moses had reported back to the Lord, He gives further instructions. The people are to purify themselves, washing their clothes, this is consecrated space. They are to put boundaries around the mountain which no one was allowed to go beyond on pain of death. In fact, they are not even to risk crossing the boundary by touching it or pursuing after animals that cross it. These rules were to be in force until they heard the ram's horn sound. Notice that the big moment when Moses would meet with God would be on the third day. They were also to abstain from sexual intercourse (v10-15).

On the third day, there is darkness, thunder and lightening. Moses leads the people out to assemble and witness the moment. They are afraid and tremble. The mountain is covered in smoke and shakes. Moses ascends the hill as the noise of the ram's horn grows louder. The Lord calls Moses to the top.

However, before giving the Law, YHWH sends Moses back down to repeat the warning about breaking through the boundaries. Moses protests the need for this insisting that the boundaries have clearly been set with warnings. He cannot see how the people might break the command (v18-25).

Ten Words

YHWH sets the commands he gives the people in the context of what he has already done for them. He is the God who has delivered them from Egypt, described as the House of Slavery. By implication, these are laws for freedom. He also is answering the question posed in 17:7 "Is the Lord among us?" The people asked where God was and his answer is that he has been right there, delivering them and providing for them (Exodus 20:-2)).

The people are not to have other gods before, or instead of YHWH. He is the one true God alone. They are not to put forward alternatives to rival or supplement who he is (v3). This includes attempting to make images or idols to worship whether of YHWH himself or of rival gods. The Lord states that he is jealous, he has concern to guard his own glory. Therefore sin in this area will lead to judgement and the consequences will not be confined to this generation but will be felt by future generations. However, this is not to encourage us to put the emphasis on judgement or see him as vindictive because his compassion and love immeasurably outweigh

his wrath (v4-6). They are not to take God's name in vain. The Hebrew word here has the idea of being destructive, idolatrous, false. In other words, they are not to misuse the name by swearing by it without attention to what it represents, by calling on God's name with no intent of truly changing or claiming to act in God's name but doing what goes against his word (v7).

They are to rest on the seventh or sabbath day from all work. This means that positively, hard work is expected for the other 6 days. The law applies to all within a household including servants and even working animals. YHWH links this back to creation. God rested on the seventh day and so too should the people (v8-11).

Parents are to be honoured. Paul in Ephesians 6 identifies this as the first command with a promise attached. The promise may be for individual long life if you listen to parental wisdom but also may be corporate. Parents were given the duty of passing on God's instructions from generation to generation and so if Israel were to experience covenant blessings in the land for many generations and not experience the curse of exile then the people would need to both listen to and follow the teaching of their elders (v12).

There follow four quick commands that are not seen as needing expansion, perhaps these should be obvious, you are not to murder, steal, commit adultery or slander their neighbour. False witness here points to a court setting, you are not to attempt to bend justice to your needs through lying. The four seem to be linked closely together (v13-16).

Finally, they are forbidden from "coveting", from desiring and lusting after the possessions of their neighbours. Whilst the previous commands point to external words and actions, this final command focuses on the heart. Coveting may also be seen as the cause of murder, theft, adultery and slander (v17).

Fear

A bit of extra context is added at the end. The people have remained at a distance, fearful whilst Moses drew near. They were too scared to hear directly from God (v18-19). Moses calls on the people not to fear. God is testing them to see if they will be faithful (v20). And so, Moses had gone up to the mountain alone. This leaves a question open. Would boundaries have been set still or would God have met directly with the people if they had allowed him to (v21)?

Altars

Some of the commandments are now expanded upon. The Laws about worshipping God alone and keeping away from idolatry are developed. There are implications for how the people are to worship. If they are not to make graven images, then they are also not to put great effort into their altars. Simple altars of earth or rough-hewn stone will suffice. Any thing more would place the emphasis on human effort. They were also to be alert to modesty and decency so high altars on platforms were ruled out due to the risk of exposure to those below (Exodus 20:22-26).

Slaves

Servants and slaves are included in the Sabbath law provision. However, this is also further extended so that they benefit themselves from the principle. Hebrews sold as slaves, perhaps to pay off debt were to serve for seven years. In the seventh, a form of sabbath takes place and they may go free. They do not have to pay anything to redeem their freedom (Exodus 21:1-2). They are to go out as they come in, single or married. This means if they have been given a wife during the time and had children, those remain with the master. The implication being that he

has acted as a form of surrogate, an extension of the master and so the family is an extension of his owner's (v3-4). However, the slave may choose to remain in service to his master and part of his household. This may well be because he wishes to stay with his family. This is symbolised by his ear being pierced (v5-6).

Female slaves also experience protections. They are not to be treated like the male slaves and put to hard manual labour. The implication is that a master may well take her as his wife or give her as a wife to a son. If he takes a disliking to her, the master cannot sell her on, he must allow her family to redeem her back. If she is given to his son, then he must treat her like a daughter. This means for example that incest laws apply, she is off limits sexually to him (v7-9). If he marries someone else, he is still to provide well for her and not deprive her. If he fails in this, then she is free to go (v10-11).

Murder

The penalty for murder is death. However, if it was not premeditated then God makes provision for mercy, the killer may flee to a place of safety or sanctuary, specifically they can flee to the Lord's altar (Exodus 21:12-14). Murder of parents is taken seriously and carries the death penalty. There do not seem to be exceptions here (v15). To steal or kidnap and enslave another person is treated on a par with murder as is the purchase of kidnapped people as slaves (v16). Cursing your parents is also treated the same as killing them (v17).

If someone is injured in a fight then they are to be compensated (v18-19). Meanwhile, if someone kills their slave, including through manslaughter, the death is to be avenged. However, if the slave survives for a few days, then the master is not to be avenged. The statement that the slave is the master's money or currency cannot in this context be considered to be implying they are mere property without rights. Rather, I think the point is that the master has already suffered loss, the death is in that sense already avenged through the loss of their labour and the care the master has put in to trying to preserve their life. This will also encourage the master not to just let the slave die or finish them off but to attempt to care for them (v20-21).

If a man assaults a pregnant woman causing her to go into early labour then he is to pay a fine as set by the husband. However, "if there is harm", which I presume means to the child, then the current penalty, including death penalty for loss of life is required (v22-25). The penalty for injuring a slave is that the master loses that slave, they are set free (v26-27).

Human life is so significant that an animal that kills forfeits its life by the same means as a murderer (stoning). However, if the animal has been in the habit of attacking and the owner despite warnings has failed to control it, they too are to be executed (v28-29). The owner may pay a ransom instead. Note that if a slave dies then a fixed ransom is set instead of the death penalty (v28-32).

Whilst animals do not have the same dignity and status, there is still responsibility to care for them, especially in respect to a neighbour's property. If your negligence leads to the death of another's beast of burden you are to make restitution, similarly restitution is to be made for when your animal causes the death of another's. As with the loss of human life, the penalty is harsher if you have failed to keep your animal under control (v33-35).

Theft and property

The Law now expands on the command, "you must not kill". A thief is to make restitution for what they have taken (Exodus 22:1). If the thief is disturbed and killed at night then there is no

penalty on the homeowner. However, if it is during daylight, then he is under bloodguilt. This reflects that in daylight it is easier to assess the thief's intent and to detain so that justice can be correctly brought. They will have to pay for their crime and if unable to restore what has been stolen they will be sold into slavery to ensure the debt is repaid (v2-3). Restitution is not simply about returning the stolen property, so for example if a stolen animal is found in their possession they are to pay back double, send back the original ox or donkey and provide another one (v4).

Neighbourliness

Compensation is to be paid if your animal strays onto someone else's land and grazes there or if your negligence whilst burning thorn bushes causes destruction on a neighbour's land (Exodus 22:5-6). If a thief steals what has been entrusted to a neighbour for safekeeping, then there is a double penalty, it seems to count as a more serious crime but if not caught then the one looking after the possessions is liable. They are to appear before God for judgement, suggesting that the priest becomes involved in justice (v7-8). Disputes over property are also settled before God. At the time, Moses would presumably have acted as God's representative and later a local priest (v9). The Lord is also called upon to settle disputes where livestock is lost, injured or dies in the keeping of a neighbour. This is to prove that they have not stolen the livestock for their own benefit. Again, compensation is to be paid. If the animal has been killed by wild animals, the carcass has to be shown as proof (v10-13).

You are liable for loss or injury to an animal in your keeping unless the owner was present in which case they remain responsible for the animal. If you hired the animal then your rent is expected to cover the risk of loss or injury (v14-15).

Faithfulness

Some Bible translations head the next section as "rules about social justice", however, it seems to be to be more to do with faithfulness and sexual immorality. Premarital sex is forbidden and so someone who seduces a young woman cannot leave her shamed but must take responsibility for her and marry her or pay significant compensation (Exodus 22:16-17). Those who engage in magical practices are to be put to death. This links into the theme both because their dependence upon pagan idols was an act of unfaithfulness to God and because sorcery may have involved sexual practices as part of pagan worship (v18). Bestiality is forbidden (v19). These laws are clearly connected to the banning of idol worship (v20).

Faithfulness to YHWH was not about ethnic purity but about loyalty to God's ways and faithfulness to Israel's own history. Their treatment of foreigners, or sojourners was to be governed by their own experience as foreigners in Egypt (v21).

Faithfulness was reflected in how they treated the vulnerable. Pagan idolatry would have seen the vulnerable as there to sacrifice on their altars or to abuse and mistreat, not so with Israel unless they wish to provoke God's wrath (v23-24). In other words, faithfulness to God should be seen in faithfulness to one another, they were to love God and to love their neighbours. Usury, the charging of interest on loans was forbidden between Israelites. Additionally, you could not deprive people of the basics in order for them to secure loans (v25-27). The law against taking God's name in vain extended to YHWH's representatives to the people, their rulers were not to be reviled (v28).

Faithfulness would involve the prompt offering of sacrifices and dedication of the firstborns. God's people were to keep short accounts with YHWH (v29-30). In all aspects of their lives, they were to recognise and honour the fact that they were a holy people, that they belonged exclusively to the Lord. This extended all the way to their diet (v31).

Integrity

One of the Ten Commandments says that "You shall not bear false witness." This is now expanded on (Exodus 23:1a). This includes partnering with others seeking to slander, especially in the context of justice. Justice should not be stacked against the poor who cannot pay for it (1b-3).

Integrity means dealing honestly, even with your enemy and ensuring that lost property is returned to them. It would be easy to see your adversary's lost animal coming into your possession as a form of vindication. Not so says the Law (v4-5).

Justice must be given to all, regardless of their wealth or lack of it. False charges should never be brought. God will judge this as wickedness. Bribes have no part to play in true justice (v6-8). Once again, we are reminded that foreigners living in the land are not to be treated differently. They too are equal before the Law and their status as sojourners should mean that they are protected not oppressed through the judicial system (v9).

Sabbath rest

God will build the idea of rest into the rhythms of life. There will be a seven-year pattern. You are to work your fields for six years and leave them fallow in the seventh year. Part of the reason for this is so that the poor can share in the produce of the land. They will be able to harvest anything that grows from the fields in the seventh year (perhaps where grain has been left in the ground. Animals will be able to eat as well (Exodus 23:10-11). The command to keep one day in seven as sabbath, restful enjoyment of God's goodness and worship of him is repeated (12). Rest is linked to worship, it includes a breaking off from idolatry (v13).

As well as the weekly and seven yearly rest, the calendar year is punctuated by holidays or feast days. There were three key festivals throughout the year when the people were to gather together and enjoy God's good provision in his presence, worshipping him and bringing their offerings. These included the Feast of Unleavened bread, linked to the Passover, celebrating the first fruits of harvest and the end of the harvest (v14-17).

Offerings were to be the best you had to bring, uncontaminated offerings, even by yeast, not the left over dried out grizzly bits the next day and not the later left overs but rather the first fruits as an expression of your trust that more was to come (v18-19a).⁴⁷ I presume that the reference to how to cook a goat links to offerings though seems to have had a more general application.

You did not cook the goat in its mother's milk, a reminder that the mother still had to provide for her offspring. This links into the theme of rest. You were not simply to exploit and exhaust the land and its provision (v19b).

Sabbath rest is linked to entry into the land. This was the true rest for God's people, rest in his presence under his rule and reign. It meant that God would go ahead to fight for them. Note that God's presence is both mediated and real. It's an angel that goes before YHWH but YHWH's

⁴⁷ Though the instructions here may have specific implications for the Passover celebrations and offerings. C.f. Alexander, *Exodus*, 524.

“name is in him.” God manifests his presence through the angel. He would however ensure that their enemies’ defeat was not instant in order to ensure that the land was cared for as the people settled. However, the inhabitants would have no stake in the future of the land, they were not to be bargained with, appeased, allied with and nor were their gods (v20-33).

The Covenant Confirmed

Chapter 24 offers a summary of what has happened. God has called Moses and key leaders to come to him but only Moses approaches him directly (v1-2). Moses returns, builds an altar and teaches the people the covenant, The people vow to keep the covenant and this agreement is marked as Moses sprinkles the blood from the offerings over them, a form of baptism if you like (v 3-8). Moses and the leaders are granted a spectacular vision of YHWH. They see him and are allowed to live (v9-10).

Moses is invited up the mountain to receive the stone tablets. God’s glory descends onto Mount Sinai. Moses goes up the mountain to receive the law and spends 40 days and 40 nights there, The number seems to be symbolic. The flood had lasted 40 days, the people spent 40 days in the wilderness, Jesus would also spend 40 days and nights fasting in the wilderness (v12-18).

Are you washed in the blood?

Imagine if you had been stood amongst the people as Moses spoke and then demonstrated the covenant by sprinkling or showering you with blood from the sacrifices. We tend to be queasy about blood, ancient people were less so. The blood was significant and significant because it was not just something happening in the distance up at the altar, it was happening to you.

Blood signified cleansing and healing. Blood will have reminded them of an earlier covenant where God in Genesis 9 told Noah that life was in the blood and so it was sacred. To be showered in blood from the altar was to receive life for yourself, to benefit from the animal’s sacrificial death.

Furthermore, it would have been noticeable. If you walked away that day and met people who had not made it to the gathering then they would have been able to tell that you had been there, They would be able to see, smell, feel the blood on you. It should be obvious to those around us that we have been to Jesus and received the new covenant through the shedding and sprinkling of his blood.

God and the vulnerable

You will notice that two groups of people get particular attention throughout the section on the Law. First there are sojourners, no-Israelites who chose to live in the land. They don’t become part of Israel but they settle, seemingly for the long term. These people are to be included within the provisions of the Law. The Law is to care for them. They are of course in return to follow the customs of God’s people. The other category is “the poor”. They are not to be disadvantaged by their poverty. There is equity here. I say specifically equity because at times people distinguish equality as equal opportunities/an equal starting point from equal outcomes. When it comes to justice, there should be equity, we don’t just want people to start from the same point before the Law, though that helps, we want them to receive the same outcome of justice.

We should be wary of attempting to apply the Law onto modern secular states. Therefore, we shouldn’t attempt to map the comments about sojourners onto our immigration system. However, there are principles to learn from.

The application to the church as God's people is of greater importance. James' letter warns against discriminating between people on the basis of wealth and class when it comes to spiritual access. We may also want to think through what it means to have sojourners amongst us. This will be both through our lives in the community and through people coming along to church who don't know Jesus yet. How do we treat them? Is there a sense of common grace, that they too receive some benefit from being amongst God's people which will lead them to Jesus.

God's holiness as blessing and challenge

God's holiness is a great theme in the Sinai passages. We see this in the way that the Law tells his people how to live in his holy presence and in the conditions that are set. There is a delineation between who can approach YHWH and who cannot. Some of the people can come so far with Moses but no further. There are boundaries set that are not to be crossed. This theme will be picked up by the structure of the Tabernacle/Temple and the roles of the priests. It however is not a new theme. Genesis 1-3 points to God as the one who brings order through boundaries such as the distinctions between day and night, sea and sky, and land and sea. God sets boundaries in Eden, around the garden for Adam to guard and within the garden through the limit on which trees he could eat from. The sin of the sons of God in Genesis 6 also seems to be a case of boundary crossing. God will set new boundaries in Genesis 9 protecting the life blood of animals and humankind.

Holiness therefore seems to be both a challenge and a blessing. The Israelites fear God and we know from Deuteronomy 1 that they themselves ask Moses to mediate. God sets boundaries because there is danger in approaching him. However, God's holiness is a blessing. The people need both the order and purity it brings as well as the power, as God sends his "terror" ahead of him. It's his holiness that drives out the enemies. His holiness is necessary but mediated through Moses and through angels.

God's people under God's rule

After the people of Israel have left Egypt, we have seen their fear, their distrust, their unfaithfulness and grumbling. They want to go back to Egypt. God provides them with food, water and protection. Jethro advises Moses to set up a system of justice so that he isn't overburdened with ruling the people and settling matters of justice.

However, what we see in Deuteronomy 19-24 is what the people truly need. They need God's presence with them and his word. God himself instructs the people how to live in his presence. Elsewhere, the Law is summed up as "Give whole-hearted love to God and selfless love to each other." The Ten commandments expand on this. We love God and our neighbour by refraining from idolatry, by honouring God in work and rest, by listening to our parents as they instruct us in God's ways and by seeking the wellbeing not the harm of others, seeking their benefit not our own.

We might also sum all of this up in the words of the shorter catechism:

"What is the chief end of man?"

"To glorify God and enjoy him forever."

Our love for him is seen in our worship as we praise him alone and as we enjoy his good provision to us. This provision is shared among us. We do not seek to deprive others so we can enjoy life and good things alone at their expense. We trust God to provide for us and do not seek to grasp what we desire for ourselves. The Ten Commandments or Ten Words are fleshed out further in the Law. Much of the detail of the Law points us towards what it means to be faithful to God In our love for him and each other.

John 1:1-2 introduces Jesus as the Word, just as we have seen that Jesus is the rock from which springs of water come and the bread from Heaven. We now have the true and better water, bread and word. We have Christ with us who writes God's Law not on stone tablets but on our hearts. Jesus is also our sabbath rest and the one who gives life. He is the obedient and faithful son, faithful to the Father and to God's people who he promises he will not lose one of.

8 Signs and symbols of God's presence

It might be tempting for some to skip over the next 15 chapters of Exodus. However, we should know better than to ignore a significant section of Scripture. It looks like we merely have a list of instructions here, building instructions, interior design instructions, clothing instructions etc. Yet, if we believe that all Scripture is God breathed then we will want to consider why the author chooses to give so much space and time in the book to these things.

Covenant symbols

The first symbol of the covenant was to be the sanctuary of tabernacle, a dwelling place for YHWH. All of the people were to make some form of contribution towards this and its contents as the materials were gathered. Some would be able to provide precious, valuable decorative materials whilst others the basic construction materials. All contributions, however, were essential (Exodus 25:1-9).

The people were also to make a box, referred to as "The Ark of the Covenant" that would be carried with them and placed in the sanctuary. The top of the It was to be overlayed with gold and carried on poles. The testimony (witness) from God, in other words the stone tablets are to be placed in the Ark. The box is to be topped with a lid. The word "kipporeth" is used uniquely to describe the Ark's cover and it is sometimes referred to as a mercy seat or atonement cover. Two figures of "cherubim", angelic beings with wings were to complete the ark with the wings overshadowing the kipporeth. God says that it is here that he will meet with his people (v10-22).

They are to make a wooden table and then golden plates to go on it. There will be bread on display on the table at all times (v23-30). A lampstand is also to be made of gold. It is to have multiple branches coming from it. The imagery is tree like. The lampstand will become the prototype for the menorah used by Jewish families around the world today (v31-40).

Covenant Place

Exodus 26-27 gives detailed instructions for the Tabernacle itself. The Tabernacle or sanctuary was to be made of curtains that intertwined blue and purple cloth, embroidered with cherubim (26:1-6). Over the tabernacle was an additional tent made with goatshair (v7-14). The frame was to be made of acacia wood (v15-30).

A veil was divide the sanctuary up. This was a holy place but the veil would cordon off the most holy or holy of holy places where the ark would reside. The table and lampstand would be outside of the veil (v31-35). The entrance to the tent itself was to be screened off (v36-37).

Covenant People

Aaron and his family line were to serve as priests in the sanctuary. Chapter 28 describes the ceremonial clothing that was to be made for them. Included in the clothing were two precious stones engraved with the names of the tribes, worn on the shoulders. Aaron as High Priest represented the people before God, so that their names were visible as Aaron offered incense and sacrifices (v9-12). A further twelve stones were set into the breastplate with the names of the tribes engraved. Aaron carried the people in his heart when he went to serve before God (v21-29). A further two stones, the urim and thumim were set into the breastplate. These seem to have been involved in a form of lot casting to make decisions and discern the Lotd's will (v30).

Note particularly the bell attached to the hem of Aaron's robe. The sound of the bell would ring out when Aaron was serving in the Holy Place. The people would know that he was still alive and that their sacrifices were effective. The High Priest's role was a serious one with a heavy burden (v34-35). The priests were to be anointed with oil and consecrated, set apart to serve YHWH with sacrifices (Exodus 29).

An altar was to be built. Aaron would offer incense on this and once a year the atoning sacrifice. Everyone was to contribute half a shekel to a census tax which was to support the work of the priests in the tent of meeting. This was a flat rate of tax. It was not linked to your finances. Everyone paid the same (Exodus 30:1-10). A bronze basin was to be made. The priests would wash their hands and feet in this before serving. Failure to do so could lead to death (Exodus 30:17-21). Specific details are also given for the oil and incense to be used (Exodus 30:34-28).

God also sets apart two people, Oholiab and Bezalel and fills them with his Spirit. They are to be responsible for making all the items to go into the Tabernacle (Exodus 31:1-11).

God is present

Some people have gone into great detail attempting to understand what each item represents and interpreting numbers, names and colours. I'm not sure that we are meant to do this, we are of course at this point reliant on their conjecture. We may trace echoes of Genesis 1-3. There is strong scholarly evidence to suggest that we are meant to see a link between the structuring of the creation account and the imagery of the tabernacle and temple. The tabernacle then is a miniature model of creation and Eden. Creation and Eden were meant to be temples for the living God. Again, though I'm cautious about attempting to make too much of detailed connections. Rather, we can see the big picture here.

Explanations are not offered in Exodus. Rather, there is a side point. Worship matters and so God goes into details. Primarily though what we see is the way in which God shows that it is possible for him to be present with his people. The unseen, unseeable, transcendent God who is holy and good, the unapproachable one makes it possible for them to approach him, makes it possible for God to be present with and near to his people.

This points us to Jesus as the true and better priest, temple, altar as well as sacrifice. God is present with his people in Jesus, Emmanuel, God with us. This means that the limits and boundaries are removed. Where only Aaron could enter into the Holy of Holies, just as only Moses could get up close to YHWH on Mount Sinai, now all of us can know God and be close to him through the Holy Spirit who indwells us all.

What should follow?

What should happen next, in the sequence of events is a description of these instructions being implemented. However, this will not happen until Exodus 35. We are about to be interrupted by what is going on back down in the camp. And it's not good.

9 Rebellion

There is now an interruption to the instructions that YHWH is giving to Moses on Sinai. Whilst Moses was meeting with God on the mountain, trouble was brewing in the camp below. Aaron would be tested, how would he respond?

“Make us gods”

The people observe that Moses is taking time to return from Sinai. They assemble before Aaron. The language of assembling is significant. “Assembly” language was associated with assembling before YHWH to hear him speak “(Exodus 32:1). Here, instead they assemble before a man, YHWH’s high priest in order to instruct him. They say that they don’t know what has become of Moses, they distance themselves from “the man who brought us up out of Egypt” but also distance their Exodus from YHWH, the one who had brought them out of the land, led, provided for them and protected them in the desert. They ask Aaron to make gods for them (v2).

Aaron, instead of declining their request and reminding them of God’s laws acquiesces. He instructs them to bring their gold jewellery to him. This would be jewellery given, at God’s prompting, by the Egyptians. It would also have been ear marked (apologies for the unintended pun) presumably for the Tabernacle and Ark of the Covenant. Aaron himself disobeys Yahweh by handcrafting graven images. He makes a golden bull⁴⁸ that would have aligned with the gods of other ancient near eastern peoples.⁴⁹ They announce together in a parody of their existing God given liturgy, , “these are the gods that brought you out of Egypt”. Note the pluralisation here. Not just of el to Elohim but of “these” leaving some ambiguity,. Alexander renders it as “These are your deity” but whilst the focus is on one idol there are hints of polytheistic thinking.⁵⁰ YHWH’s role as saviour is usurped. The people see the god behind this idol as th one who brought them out of Egypt (v3-4).⁵¹

Aaron builds an altar and calls a feast. There is some ambiguity as to whether these are considered alternative gods in his mind or images of YHWH as he invites the people to “feast before the Lord.” The offering of sacrifices soon descends into an orgy (v5-6).

Judgement and intercession

God now speaks. He tells Moses to go down to “your people, who you brought out of Egypt.” It is now his turn to distance himself from a people who have rejected him. His observation is that the people have been so quick to turn away and disobey his commands. He condemns them as “stiff-necked” or stubborn, a label that will become familiar and he vows to destroy them and make a new covenant people from Moses, or his descendants (Exodus 32:7-10).

⁴⁸⁴⁸ Whilst often referred to as a golden calf, Alexander notes that “The Hebr term “egel” denotes ‘a young bull’ in its prime, possibly up to 3 years of age (c.f. Gen 15:9), not a vulnerable calf.” Alexander, *Exodus*, 622.

⁴⁹ Alexander, *Exodus*, 622.

⁵⁰ Alexander, *Exodus*, 622.

⁵¹ Note, commentators believe that the people primarily saw the idol as a representation of YHWH rather than alternative or rival gods, though still a serious breach of the commandments. C.f. Enns, *Exodus*, 570. However, the introduction of an idol the request for gods to be made is at best ambiguous. Further, the very making of an idol with its focus on a limited set of attributes and in defiance of the claim that God cannot be represented in such form does mean that whatever they may have believed and convinced themselves of, this was a very different god.

Moses pleads with God. He insists that it is YHWH who rescued the people. He points out that if God destroys Israel then it will appear to vindicate the Egyptians and they will mock him. He argues that God will be breaking his covenant promises to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. YHWH relents and shows mercy (v11-14).

Moses now returns to the people with the stone tablets. He meets Joshua who has waited faithfully for him. Joshua says that it sounds like war has broken out but Moses responds that it is singing not war that they can hear. Perhaps he had not been fully alert to how far the people had descended into depravity, maybe too there is shock at seeing his own brother and tribe leading the rebellion but Moses becomes very angry. He destroys the stone tablets and then the idol. He burns it and grinds it down into powder and mixes it with water, forcing the people to consume their own idol. Aaron tries to absolve himself by blaming the people and lying, claiming that he threw the gold into the fire and the image came out. Even that claim to superstitious magic would not really be enough to take away his culpability of course (v15-30).⁵²

Moses sees the full state of things. The people have “broken loose” -implicitly of all restraint, the euphemistic language suggests full scale depravity and sexual immorality. He asks “who is on YHWH’s side?” The Levites come to him and he orders them to go through the camp and execute those in rebellion. Three thousand are killed. Moses tells them that their faithful obedience will be rewarded with blessing (v25-29).

Moses now returns to YHWH. He confesses the sin of the people and offers to stand in their place and be punished, to be wiped out from God’s record of his people. YHWH says that the people must pay for their own sin. He will not “blot out” Moses but those who rebelled. He sends Moses back to lead the people to the land, accompanied by his angel (v30-34). Then he sends a plague into the camp bringing further death and desolation (v35).

Abandoned?

YHWH tells Moses to take the people away from Sinai. He will send his angel ahead to defeat their enemies in the land but he will withhold his own presence from them. He tells Moses to announce his judgement, the people are stiff necked, they are to remove all remaining jewellery and prepare for his verdict on them.

This causes the people to lament and grieve (Exodus 33:1-6). In the camp, Moses would meet YHWH in “the tent of meeting” to receive instruction “face to face”. The people would wait outside for him to bring instruction from YHWH (7-11). Presumably it is as the tent of meeting, rather than on the mountain that Moses first intercedes. He again pleads with YHWH not to remove his presence from the people. YHWH must go with them and own them as his people again (v12-16). YHWH agrees (v17).

Now, Moses asks one further request. To give evidence of his promise, Moses asks YHWH to show him his full glory, to let him meet him face to face in a manner which seems to go beyond the description of face-to-face meeting in v11 (v18). YHWH says that this is not possible without killing Moses. Instead he tells him to go to a certain place and to hide in the cleft of the rock. YHWH will allow his glory to pass by and Moses will be granted a view of his back but

⁵² The method of destruction may suggest that it was a wooden structure overlaid with gold rather than a cast gold object. C.f. Alexander, *Exodus*, 622.

whilst his glory is passing immediately by. The Lord will proclaim his name over Moses. YHWH will shield Moses' eyes from a full revelation of his glory (v19).

Echoes of Eden's rebellion

There are echoes of Eden here. There is a pause to YHWH's speech, a distancing of the people from Him just as in Genesis 3 we see the serpent interrupt God's creation speech. The people's assembly before Aaron imitates the way in which Adam and Eve assemble at the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil. Here the call upon Aaron to make gods for them, there, Adam and Eve accepted the invitation from the Serpent to make them into gods. They seek beauty, glory and hope in something false, just as Adam and Eve had sought those things from the tree. Aaron's taking of the jewellery echoes the first humans' taking of the fruit. Whilst not left naked, the people are symbolically stripped of adornment.

Aaron's attempt to deflect blame echoes that of Adam and Eve. If Sinai is a mediated Eden, then YHWH's sending the people away early (of course at some point Adam and Eve would have left the Garden to subdue the earth), especially if without his presence echoes the driving out from the Garden.

When God requires our worship, we are filled, clothed, renewed. When Satan demands our worship, we are emptied, robbed, stripped, debased and exiled.

New Tablets

God instructs Moses to cut two new stone tablets. The first two had been given to him by YHWH. That Moses has to provide the new ones perhaps indicates a small rebuke, just as Moses later in anger smote his rod against the rock, here his anger had caused him to act in destructive rage against the very covenant documents upon which his appeal to God was based. However, note that it is still God who takes responsibility for engraving the commandments on the stones (Exodus 34:1).⁵³ Moses is to come alone to the mountain with the tablets which he does the next morning (v2-4). The Lord comes down to meet him in the cloud, stands with Moses and proclaims his name. Notice the foreshadowing of Jesus, the Son of Man who comes with the clouds and ascends into them. The anthropomorphic language we have seen already of God's hand and face now here pointing to God standing with him may point toward a theophany, YHWH appearing in human form as he meets with and speaks to Moses (v4-5).

The Lord passes in front of Moses as promised and pronounces his name, notice that this goes beyond YHWH and extends to a full descriptive paragraph emphasising his faithfulness, love, compassion and justice. His name is tied to his attributes and those attributes are the foundation for our own moral values (v6-7). Moses' response to this is first to bow in worship and now, on the basis of God's own character to intercede again for the people, pleading that YHWH will go with them and not withhold his presence (v8-9).

Hands, feet and faces

We know that God is spirit and therefore without body parts. However, at times in Scripture we find references to his body, to him seeing with his eyes, to him rescuing with a strong arm or to

⁵³ C.f. Exodus 24:12.

the breath in his nostrils. In most cases, this anthropomorphic language is metaphorical to indicate an aspect of his character such as his power to save and his justice. However, there are moments when we see God make his presence manifest in a specific place so that people see something or someone visible. This might include the fiery pillar as a good example. We refer to these appearances as theophanies.

Hebrews 2:2 indicates that the Mosaic covenant was mediated through angels. We see moments when there is a clear distinction between an angel and the Lord as in this section of Exodus when YHWH says that he will send an angel but not go up with Israel. At other times though, there seems to be a blurring between “the Lord” and “the angel of the Lord.” In those contexts I would suggest that we are seeing examples of the angel “mediating YHWH’s presence”. Angels, although spirit seem to appear in human form. This is of course distinct from The Son, incarnate as fully man. There is though a strong tradition of assuming that these theophanies such as here in Exodus 34, especially with the emphasis on covenant compassion and redemption or in Genesis 2-3 where the Lord walks in the garden primarily involve the Son, Christ in a pre-incarnate appearing.

Renewing the Covenant

Now YHWH renews his covenant with God’s people. YHWH will drive out the Canaanite tribes from the land, he will go before the people (Exodus 34:11). The Israelites are to be careful not to get into covenants with the inhabitants but rather are to destroy their idols and altars (v11-16). They are not to cast any gods out of metal themselves (v17).

They are to keep the festivals and sabbaths, a reminder that they are dependent on YHWH, that he is the one defeating their enemies, he gave them the land and he is the one who brought them up out of Egypt (v21-26).

YHWH tells Moses to write the words. So, whilst it is YHWH who is engraving them, it seems to be through Moses that he acts to fulfil this. Moses spends 40 days and 40 nights there on the mountain writing out the covenant commands with the Lord (v27-28).

Shiny

Moses returns from the mountain and from seeing something of YHWH’s glory and his own face reflects this, shining with a transferred radiance making it difficult for the people to look at him. They fear him. He addresses them with the covenant commands and then covers his face with a veil (Exodus 34:29-33).

Moses followed this pattern of unveiling to meet with YHWH and report His Words to the people afterwards. His shining countenance offered evidence that he had been in the Lord’s presence and brought his word to them (v34-35).

The unveiling of our faces: three stages of application

This incident in Israel’s history would first of all apply to God’s people in the land. We see that they continued to be a stiff-necked people. YHWH remained faithful to his covenant and compassionate but Israel was the rebellious son. They could not presume to rely on his compassion and therefore his manifest presence with them, overlooking his righteousness and justice. They experienced exile from the land when he handed them over to enemies. Even on their return from exile, the later prophets and writings suggest that it was not in the same way

that they had gone up from Egypt. The Shekinah presence of God never returned to the Temple and so one view is that the return from exile was never seen as complete.

We should apply Scripture through Christ to us. If Israel proved to be the rebellious son, then Christ is the obedient and faithful son. Jesus is also the true and better Moses who fasted in the wilderness for forty days and nights. Rather than destroying the law as Moses did the tablets, Christ fulfilled it so that the Law is not written on stone or hearts of stone but on hearts of flesh. In Jesus, fully God and fully man, we see God manifest, present with his people.

For Christians, this part of Exodus warns us against idolatry. We can become quickly forgetful about God's faithfulness and goodness, prone to blame him for when things go wrong and to see our own actions and those of others as the cause of good in our lives. I noted in an earlier footnote that the Israelites may have believed they were only making an image of YHWH and convinced themselves of this. However, the reality was that they ended up with a very different god. We may not believe that the things we put our hope in or that we fear are rivalling god and yet whether it be personal prosperity, liberation theology or a baptised nationalism, we find that those things by becoming alternative saviours and telling a different Gospel distort our understanding of God so that we end up with a different god entirely.

In Christ we see God's compassionate mercy and his justice at work. Sin is judged and we are forgiven. He promises his presence with us. The veil is removed and Christ is present permanently with us through the Holy Spirit. There is a greater day to come when we will see him face to face.⁵⁴

“¹²Since we have such a hope, we are very bold, ¹³not like Moses, who would put a veil over his face so that the Israelites might not gaze at the outcome of what was being brought to an end. ¹⁴But their minds were hardened. For to this day, when they read the old covenant, that same veil remains unlifted, because only through Christ is it taken away. ¹⁵Yes, to this day whenever Moses is read a veil lies over their hearts. ¹⁶But when one^[c] turns to the Lord, the veil is removed. ¹⁷Now the Lord^[d] is the Spirit, and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom. ¹⁸And we all, with unveiled face, beholding the glory of the Lord,^[e] are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another.^[f] For this comes from the Lord who is the Spirit.”⁵⁵

⁵⁴ 1 John 3:1-2.

⁵⁵ 2 Corinthians 3:12-18.

10 Moving in

We've moved home a couple of times. We've never built our new home from scratch. I probably don't need to tell you that. However, each move means careful planning, getting measurements, choosing furniture, assembling shelves, hanging curtains etc. The Israelites would one day move into "God's place", the promised land. In the meantime, during their journey through the wilderness, they were given the blueprint for a house, or tabernacle (tent structure), God's place in miniature. They had been given the detailed instructions about its fittings and furnishings and now we get a sense of what it meant for them to move in as Moses instructed them step by step through getting things ready.

Assembled, invited, equipped

The people are assembled, a juxtaposition with their assembly before Aaron (Exodus 35:1). Moses reminds them of the command to work six days and rest on the seventh. This should be seen in the context of the specific work they are about to undertake. Even work on the Lord's house is to be rested from (pastors take note). Perhaps it is helpful to consider both that all work is the Lord's work and that work on his place in miniature reflects and imitates creation work. Indeed, some have compared the creation account to the building of a cosmic temple sanctuary for Yahweh. The Lord worked on the cosmic tabernacle for six days and rested, so should we (v2-3).

Moses invites contributions of materials from oil to metal to cloth for the tabernacle. The people are to do this voluntarily, willingly and generously. These were contributions for the tabernacle and for the priestly garments (v4-9). The craftsmen were to contribute time to building and constructing the tabernacle and its contents (Exodus 35:10-19). The people respond willingly. Notice that all the people were included, leaders and people, men and women. In fact, we are told about the work of skilled women prior to the men (v20-29)..

Moses reminds the people that Bezalel and Ohaliab have been gifted and trained as craftsmen, ready to work on the Tabernacle. They were skilled in stone cutting, engraving, wood carving and embroidery. They were filled with God's Spirit for this purpose (v30-35). Those that God had gifted in this area were called to do the work of constructing the Tabernacle. They were not given free rein despite their talent but were to follow the Lord's instructions (Exodus 36:1). So, Moses called them to the task and they set to work constructing the Tabernacle (v2-38).

As well as constructing the Tabernacle, Bezalel made the Ark of the Covenant (Exodus 37:1-9), the table (v10-16) the lampstand (v17-25), the altar (v25-29). The altar for burnt offering (Exodus 38:1-7), the bronze basin (v8) and the court enclosure (v9-20). A record was kept of all the materials used in the work (v21-31). Finally the priestly garments were made (Exodus 39:1-31).

Presentation and evaluation

When everything was ready, it was brought to Moses and assembled for him to inspect. His evaluation was that all was in accordance with God's plan (Exodus 39:32-43). Note the echoes of the creation account in Genesis. "Thus all the work...was finished" (v32) echoes the conclusion of the days of creation in Genesis 2:1-4. Mose's observation of conformity to God's plan (v43) echoes the daily assessment "God saw that it was good" and the end of the week observation "it was very good". Moses blesses the people just as God had blessed his creation.

God instructs Moses to have the Tabernacle erected and commissioned on the first day of the month (Exodus 40:1-15), Moses does this and so, as in Genesis 2 with the Lord, the conclusion

is that “Moses finished the work”. Note, of course that he is the one responsible but the work is carried out through delegation (v16-33).

The finished work of Christ -true and better Tabernacle, true and better Moses

Jesus is the one described as dwelling, making his home, pitching his tent or Tabernacling amongst us. Much of the imagery in John’s Gospel pictures him not just as sacrifice and High Priest but as the Temple or Tabernacle. In Jesus, God is with us, making his home with us. We are called to be in Christ, making our home with God in him. He is the Tabernacle/Temple and he prophesied concerning his death and resurrection that the people would seek to destroy that temple but he would rebuild it in three days. The Father’s evaluation was that he was “well pleased” with his son.

Jesus is the true and better Moses (Hebrews 3:1-6). His work is finished, complete and good. On the Cross he declared “It is finished.” Hebrews 1:3 talks about Him sitting down beside the Father. You sit down to rest once you have completed your work.

Our work

Exodus 35-40 has much to teach us. We are reminded that we should not over distinguish between spiritual and practical work. As with the first deacons, the workers were filled with the spirit for their labour. We are reminded that all, regardless of standing, age or gender are called to play our part in the Lord’s Work. We can reflect on how the work of constructing the Tabernacle modelled wider creation work and was modelled on the original act of Creation. We may think of Church as a place where we work together to glorify God but also to be equipped and prepared for work in the wider world. Our day to day work whether at home with the family or in paid employment is all to God’s glory and has value. In Christ, God’s evaluation of our work will be “well done, good and faithful servant.” Then we will enter into our eternal rest.

11 The Glory of the Lord

The Tabernacle has now been prepared and assembled. It seems as well that Moses' make shift "Tent of Meeting" has been replaced by the new shrine. The Tabernacle has been consecrated and so that specific work was finished for Moses.

God's manifest presence

God's presence with his people has been represented by a pillar of cloud moving before them. Now, that cloud moves so that it rests over the Tabernacle (Exodus 40:34). The presence is so impenetrable that Moses cannot go into the tent. We often think of "glory" in terms of light but it is Scripturally often associated with thick darkness that sets God apart and beyond us. In fact, the word "*chabod*" has the sense of heaviness or weightiness (v35).

The cloud would lift up from the Tabernacle whenever it was time for the people to move on and when they struck camp, it would again settle on the Tabernacle for the duration of their stay in one place (v36-37). As with before, the cloud became fire at night, lighting up the sky and so this phenomenon was constantly visible to all the people (v34-28).

Bookends

Here we come to the end of the book of Exodus but not the end of The Exodus. The story of the journey to Canaan will continue in Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy. However, this is a good place to pause. We leave God's people continuing a journey. There is a sense of now and not yet. They are out of Egypt, they have been set free from slavery. However, they are still to arrive at their promised destination. Yet, even though they are not fully at home in God's place, he is still tangibly, undeniably present with them.

We may identify with such a context. We are in our own "now and not yet". There's the big picture "now and not yet" as we live between Christ's finished work at Calvary -he has saved/delivered us from slavery to sin and death – and his return as King at the consummation of the ages when all will be made new and we will be with him forever. In the meantime we have his presence with us. Just as the people of Israel had God's Covenant Word on the Tablets, so we have God's Word in Scripture. Just as they had covenant signs and symbols, so too we have the means of grace in baptism and communion. Just as they had God's presence, we too have the holy Spirit and as they were called to assemble so too we are called to gather as the Church.