

The Message of Exodus

J.K. McKee

The Book of Exodus is one of the most important, yet controversial books of the entire Bible, and certainly the most important book of the Torah. Commentator John I. Durham confidently asserts, "The Book of Exodus is the first book of the Bible."¹ This is because without an Exodus of Israel from Egypt, there is no people to preserve and testify to the traditions regarding Creation, Noah, Abraham and the Patriarchs, and the faithfulness of God toward these individuals. In other words, without the Book of Exodus you have no Book of Genesis. And this is only one of the obvious themes that gets overlooked when one considers the significance of Exodus.

Every year in the Spring, sometime between Passover or Easter (or Easter and Passover depending on the year), the Exodus usually gets a great deal of publicity. There are many questions and debates surrounding the Exodus. When did it take place? How many people were actually involved? What was the route of the Exodus and the real location of Mount Sinai? Who was the Pharaoh of the Exodus? Why is there no Egyptian record surrounding it? And while it may be good to engage with these discussions from time to time, too frequently people take their eyes off of the Biblical text and the significant message(s) that Exodus has for us as people of faith, and away from the unique character forming ability that the Book of Exodus so aptly possesses. Furthermore, as Messianics who often examine Exodus every year, are there any things that we overlook regarding this critical text of God's revelation?

The Hebrew title of the Book of Exodus is *Shemot*, meaning "Names," as the text begins with "These are the names of the sons of Israel" (Exodus 1:1), testifying how the Patriarch Jacob and his sons entered into Egypt, and have now "multiplied greatly and became exceedingly numerous, so that the land was filled with them" (Exodus 1:6). While Joseph had been used in the past to deliver Egypt through a time of famine and trial, making a great name for himself (Genesis chs. 39-50), a new Egyptian dynasty and a new Pharaoh had come to power "who did not know about Joseph" (Exodus 1:8). Not knowing about Joseph, this dynasty found the Semitic Israelites to be a convenient workforce, and they were concerned "if war breaks out, [they] will join our enemies, fight against us and leave the country"

¹ John I. Durham, *Word Biblical Commentary: Exodus*, Vol. 3 (Waco, TX: Word Books, 1987), xix.

Messianic Spring Holiday Helper

(Exodus 1:10).² The Israelites in Egypt, while having greatly multiplied, found themselves pressed into deep servitude to Egypt, as the Egyptians “made their lives bitter with hard labor in brick and mortar and with all kinds of work in the fields” (Exodus 1:14).

In spite of the Israelites being placed in slavery to Egypt, the Egyptians were still worried as they did multiply. The Pharaoh thus rules that Israelite males who are born are to be killed (Exodus 1:16), and sees to it that a search be made for infant males to be thrown into the Nile (Exodus 1:22).

A Levite woman conceives, giving birth to a son, and is able to actually hide him for three months (Exodus 1:2). Yet she is unable to hide him indefinitely, and so “she got a papyrus basket for him and coated it with tar and pitch. Then she placed the child in it and put it among the reeds along the bank of the Nile” (Exodus 1:4; cf. Hebrews 11:23). The boy’s sister watches this from a distance (Exodus 1:5), and then sees it actually floating to where the Pharaoh’s daughter is bathing. The Pharaoh’s daughter recognizes the child as one of the Hebrew babies, but is intent to take it for her own. “She named him Moses, saying, ‘I drew him out of the water’” (Exodus 1:10). The prince Moses is raised as a member of the Egyptian court.

Somehow, although raised Egyptian, Moses knew that he was different. “One day, after Moses had grown up, he went out to where his own people were and watched them at their hard labor. He saw an Egyptian beating a Hebrew, one of his own people. Glancing this way and that and seeing no one, he killed the Egyptian and hid him in the sand” (Exodus 2:11-12). Having been enraged at the terrible treatment toward the slaves, he reaches a point of decision and somehow recognizes that he too was a Hebrew. This murder is known by two Hebrews the next day (Exodus 2:11-12), and news also gets back to Pharaoh (Exodus 2:15). Presumably, Moses as a prince of Egypt and grandson of Pharaoh could have killed a common Egyptian and easily gotten away with it. But the revelation that he was actually a Hebrew changed everything. Moses quickly had to flee to Midian for his own life.

Moses’ life in Midian certainly did not have the luxuries he experienced in Egypt. He becomes acquainted with the priest of Midian, Jethro, whose daughter, Zipporah, he marries (Exodus 2:20-21). Moses becomes a shepherd. While in this time of exile, “the king of Egypt died. The Israelites groaned in their slavery and cried out...God heard their groaning and he remembered his covenant with Abraham, with Isaac and with Jacob” (Exodus 2:23-24). As he tended the flock of Jethro at Mount Horeb, Moses witnesses a burning bush, exclaiming “I will go over and see this strange sight—why the bush does not burn up” (Exodus 3:3). The Lord cries out to Moses from the bush, and Moses simply responds with *hinneni*, “Here I am” (Exodus 3:4). Moses removes his sandals on the holy ground (Exodus 3:5), and the Lord identifies who he is by telling Moses that He knows of the suffering of Israel and that He will deliver them into the land promised to their forefathers (Exodus 3:7-8): “[T]he cry of the Israelites has reached me, and I have seen the way the Egyptians are oppressing them. So now, go. I am sending you to Pharaoh to bring my people the Israelites out of Egypt” (Exodus 3:9-10).

² Consult the FAQ entry on the Messianic Apologetics website “Exodus, Pharaoh who did not know Joseph.”

Moses is not entirely convinced that returning to Egypt and speaking to a people whom he barely knows will work. Moses does not even know the proper name of the God to whom he is speaking, who will promptly tell him "I AM WHO I AM" (Exodus 3:14), *ehyeh asher ehyeh*.³ He then gives him a special name, that not even the Patriarchs knew (cf. Exodus 6:3), YHWH (HaShem),⁴ to designate Himself from the many gods of Egypt (Exodus 3:15). Moses is to tell the Egyptian Pharaoh to let the Israelites go for a three-day journey to worship Him, but instead he will resist. The Lord says, "I know that the king of Egypt will not let you go unless a mighty hand compels him. So I will stretch out my hand and strike the Egyptians with all the wonders that I will perform among them. After that, he will let you go" (Exodus 3:19-20). The Israelites will leave Egypt with a great number of spoils (Exodus 3:21-22).

Moses, still not entirely sure, is shown the power of the Lord right before his eyes. His staff turns into a snake (Exodus 4:3-5), and his hand turns leprous as he inserts it into his cloak (Exodus 4:6-8). The Lord speaks to Moses about the kinds of mighty acts he will be responsible for unleashing upon Egypt (Exodus 4:8-10). And worried about his speaking abilities, the Lord, although irritated with Moses, tells him that his brother Aaron will be used as a spokesman (Exodus 4:11-16). Coming down from the mountain, Moses returns to his enslaved people in Egypt (Exodus 4:18-20) to face a new Pharaoh and the biggest challenge of his life (Exodus 4:21-22).

Aaron is led into the wilderness to meet Moses on his return to Egypt (Exodus 4:27-28), and both of them demonstrate the Lord's signs before the Israelite elders (Exodus 4:29-31). Convinced of their cause, Moses and Aaron go before Pharaoh for the first time, commanding that the people be allowed to go into the desert to worship before HaShem for a three-day festival (Exodus 5:1-3). The Pharaoh refuses because he is unwilling to stop the Israelites' labor (Exodus 5:4-5), and he then issues the order that they not be given straw to make their required allotment of bricks (Exodus 5:6-19). The people were furious with Moses in disbelief, clamoring, "May the LORD look upon you and judge you! You have made us a stench to Pharaoh and his officials and have put a sword in their hand to kill us" (Exodus 5:21). Moses beseeches the Lord, expressing some doubts (Exodus 5:22-23) as the Israelites deride him. Under extreme stress, the Lord repeats the great calling that He has given Moses to free His people (Exodus 6:1-8),⁵ and He tells him to go again before Pharaoh.

Once again Moses must go before Pharaoh, but this time God says "I will harden Pharaoh's heart" (Exodus 7:3). Even though Moses and Aaron must obey the command of the Lord to go before Egypt's king, he will still not listen to them (Exodus 7:4), requiring Divine judgments upon Egypt to know that HaShem is the God of the universe (Exodus 7:5). Moses and Aaron perform their first "miracle" (Exodus 7:9) before Pharaoh when Aaron's staff is transformed into a snake. The

³ The Hebrew *ehyeh asher ehyeh* was rendered as *egō eimi* or "I AM" in the Greek Septuagint. *Egō eimi* is used numerous times in the Gospels pointing to the Divinity of Yeshua the Messiah (cf. Matthew 14:24-33; Mark 14:61-63; Luke 22:70-71; John 8:56-59; 18:4-6).

⁴ In this article, when wanting to point people to the Divine Name of God, I will simply refer to YHWH as HaShem, concurrent with the traditional Jewish interpretation of the Third Commandment (Exodus 20:7; Deuteronomy 5:11; cf. m.*Yoma* 6:2), adhered to by Yeshua and His Apostles (cf. 3 John 7).

⁵ In the text of Exodus following (6:14-27), a Levite genealogical chart is given, validating Moses' leadership.

Messianic Spring Holiday Helper

Pharaoh is not impressed as his magicians can do the same thing (Exodus 7:11), even though “Aaron’s staff swallowed up their staffs” (Exodus 7:12). Pharaoh’s heart is hardened (Exodus 7:13). What follows are a series of distinct encounters between Moses and Pharaoh, and great ecological plagues are unleashed upon Egypt.

The tension between Moses as leader of Israel and the Pharaoh of Egypt is obvious: “Pharaoh’s heart is unyielding; he refuses to let the people go” (Exodus 7:14). Moses is commanded by God to turn all of the water in Egypt into blood, and it is so bad that even the fish of the Nile die (Exodus 7:16-21). The Pharaoh is still not convinced, as his own magicians can replicate the act (Exodus 7:22).

A week later Moses goes before the Pharaoh again, repeating God’s request that His people be allowed to worship Him for three days in the wilderness (Exodus 7:25-8:1). He is threatened with a plague of frogs, which will come out of the Nile and overwhelm the people as an annoying menace (Exodus 8:2-5). Even though Moses and Aaron are able to call the frogs upon Egypt, so can Pharaoh’s own magicians (Exodus 8:7). For the first time, though, Pharaoh actually asks Moses and Aaron to “Pray to the LORD to take the frogs away from me and my people, and I will let your people go to offer sacrifices to the LORD” (Exodus 8:8), as he is at least beginning to recognize that HaShem has some power. The next day, the plague of frogs stops (Exodus 8:10-11), as “They were piled into heaps, and the land reeked of them” (Exodus 8:14). Pharaoh hardens his own heart (Exodus 8:15).

The third plague comes without an initial clash with Pharaoh, as the Lord simply commands Aaron to “‘Stretch out your staff and strike the dust of the ground,’ and throughout the land of Egypt the dust will become gnats” (Exodus 8:16). This is the first plague that the magicians of Egypt were *unable* to reproduce (Exodus 8:18), who are forced to tell their king “This is the finger of God” (Exodus 8:19a). Still, the Pharaoh “would not listen, just as the LORD had said” (Exodus 8:19b).

The next encounter with Pharaoh comes with the decree that if he does not let the Israelites go worship HaShem in the wilderness for three days, “I will send swarms of flies on you and your officials, on your people and into your houses. The houses of the Egyptians will be full of flies, and even the ground where they are” (Exodus 8:20). Included in this warning is that the Israelites in Goshen will not have this plague affect them (Exodus 8:22), as the Lord says “I will make a distinction between my people and your people” (Exodus 8:23). As the flies are unleashed upon Egypt, Pharaoh actually extends permission to Moses, “Go, sacrifice to your God here in the land” (Exodus 8:25), as he is still at least beginning to recognize that HaShem has some power. Yet, Moses insists that God will only allow the sacrifices outside of Egypt (Exodus 8:26-27), so Pharaoh says that they can do it “but you must not go very far. Now pray for me” (Exodus 8:28). Yet, as the flies leave Egypt, Pharaoh once again hardens his heart (Exodus 8:32).

Each plague gets more and more intense. The Pharaoh is once again told that if he does not allow the Israelites to worship God in the wilderness, severe consequences will be unleashed. This time, a major catastrophe will be unleashed against Egyptian livestock (Exodus 9:1-3), but not against the livestock of the Israelites (Exodus 9:4). “Pharaoh sent men to investigate and found that not even one of the animals of the Israelites had died. Yet his heart was unyielding” (Exodus 9:7).

The fifth plague comes when God commands Moses and Aaron, “Take handfuls of soot from a furnace and have Moses toss it into the air in the presence of Pharaoh. It will become fine dust over the whole land of Egypt, and festering boils will break out on men and animals throughout the land” (Exodus 9:8-9). This was yet another plague that the magicians of Egypt could not replicate (Exodus 9:11), and so the Lord hardens Pharaoh’s heart (Exodus 9:12).

The next encounter with Pharaoh is even more intense. If the Pharaoh does not let the Israelites go into the desert to worship the Lord, He says “this time I will send the full force of my plagues against you and against your officials and your people, so you may know that there is no one like me in all the earth. For by now I could have stretched out my hand and struck you and your people with a plague that would have wiped you off the earth. But I have raised you up for this very purpose, that I might show you my power and that my name might be proclaimed in all the earth” (Exodus 9:14-16). HaShem promises to “send the worst hailstorm that has ever fallen on Egypt, from the day it was founded till now” (Exodus 9:18). The hail, along with significant thunder and lightning, descends upon Egypt (Exodus 9:22-25), but not upon the Israelites in Goshen (Exodus 9:26). The Pharaoh pleads with Moses and Aaron, “This time I have sinned... The LORD is in the right, and I and my people are in the wrong” (Exodus 9:27), agreeing to let them go to worship Him (Exodus 9:28). However, once the plague subsides Pharaoh recants, this time “He and his officials hardened their hearts” (Exodus 9:34) refusing to let Israel go.

For some reason or another, the Pharaoh of Egypt and his court fail to realize that by refusing the request of HaShem they are plunging their country into utter ruin. God subsequently tells Moses and Aaron to once again go before him, asking him “How long will you refuse to humble yourself before me? Let my people go, so that they may worship me” (Exodus 10:3). The Lord says that if Pharaoh does not allow this, locusts will be unleashed upon the Egyptians, and “They will cover the face of the ground so that it cannot be seen” (Exodus 10:5). Pharaoh’s officials exhibit some common sense: “How long will this man be a snare to us? Let the people go, so that they may worship the LORD their God. Do you not yet realize that Egypt is ruined?” (Exodus 10:7). Pharaoh agrees to let *only* the Israelite males go worship Him, and that the whole population including females and small children is not allowed to go (Exodus 10:8-10). By refusing the Lord’s request, locusts are unleashed upon Egypt (Exodus 10:12-15). Pharaoh confesses once again that he has sinned against Him, and a strong wind takes all of the locusts into the Red Sea (Exodus 10:16-19). Still, Pharaoh hardens his heart (Exodus 10:20).

There is no encounter with the Pharaoh as the ninth plague manifests itself upon Egypt. Moses is simply told by the Lord, “Stretch out your hand toward the sky so that darkness will spread over Egypt—darkness that can be felt” (Exodus 10:21). This *choshek* engulfed Egypt for three days, although not the dwellings of the Israelites (Exodus 10:23). Pharaoh summons Moses and appears to capitulate, this time allowing the women and children to go with them into the wilderness to worship God. He does, though, say “only leave your flocks and herds behind” (Exodus 10:24). This is unacceptable as those animals are needed to offer burnt offerings to the Lord (Exodus 10:25-26). God thus hardens Pharaoh’s heart, and he forcibly tells Moses, “Get out of my sight! Make sure you do not appear before me again! The day you see my face you will die” (Exodus 10:28).

Messianic Spring Holiday Helper

The tenth and final plague upon Egypt is the most severe and serious. HaShem says, "After that, [Pharaoh] will let you go from here, and when he does, he will drive you out completely" (Exodus 11:1). Far be it from just being able to go worship the Lord in the wilderness, the Israelites will be let go completely from the bonds of Egypt (cf. Exodus 11:3), and they will leave with a great amount of spoil (Exodus 11:2). The Lord intends to "go throughout Egypt. Every firstborn son of Egypt will die, from the firstborn of Pharaoh, who sits on the throne, to the firstborn son of the slave girl, who is at her hand mill, and all the firstborn of the cattle will die. There will be loud wailing throughout Egypt" (Exodus 11:4-6).

The command is given in Exodus for the Israelites to commemorate this event by remembering the Passover. Prior to the plague of the firstborn being unleashed upon Egypt, the Israelites were told to take the blood of a lamb "and put it on the sides and tops of the doorframes of the houses" (Exodus 12:7). They were also to eat its meat, along with bitter herbs and unleavened bread (Exodus 12:8). The original Passover meal was to be eaten in haste, as the promised departure from Egypt was imminent (Exodus 12:11).

In the plague upon Egypt's firstborn, HaShem is clear in saying "I will bring judgment on all the gods of Egypt" (Exodus 12:12), but also that "The blood will be a sign for you on the houses where you are; and when I see the blood, I will pass over you. No destructive plague will touch you when I strike Egypt" (Exodus 12:13). So significant is this Passover event, "This is a day you are to commemorate; for generations to come you shall celebrate it as a festival to the LORD—a lasting ordinance" (Exodus 12:14). The Festival of Unleavened Bread is also to be commemorated for the week following, as one contemplates the departure from Egypt (Exodus 12:15-20; 13:7-10) and eats nothing with yeast. Critical lessons are to be taught to each generation as one remembers the deliverance of God (Exodus 12:24-27, 43-50).

As the Israelites assemble to have a very sacred and sober meal of lamb, bitter herbs, and unleavened bread, "At midnight the LORD struck down all the firstborn in Egypt...Pharaoh and all his officials and all the Egyptians got up during the night, and there was loud wailing in Egypt, for there was not a house without someone dead" (Exodus 12:29-30).

The Egyptian Pharaoh, leader of the Thirteenth Century B.C.E. superpower, is now completely humiliated before the power of HaShem the God of Israel. He summons Moses and Aaron, telling them "Up! Leave my people, you and the Israelites! Go, worship the LORD as you have requested" (Exodus 12:31). "The Egyptians urged the people to hurry and leave the country. 'For otherwise,' they said, 'we will all die!'" (Exodus 12:33). The Israelites gather spoil of "silver and gold and...clothing" (Exodus 12:35), and several hundred thousand people make their way from Ramses to Succoth (Exodus 12:37).

The Israelites find themselves nestled in a camp on the shores of the Red Sea, as God prohibited them from traveling to Canaan via the dangerous Philistine country, lest they desire to return to Egypt (Exodus 13:17-18). With them are the mummified remains of the Patriarch Joseph (Exodus 13:19; Genesis 50:26). The Lord appears to them "in a pillar of cloud to guide them on their way and by night in a pillar of fire to give them light, so that they could travel by day or night. Neither the pillar of cloud by day nor the pillar of fire by night left its place in front of the people" (Exodus 13:21-22).

While the Israelites are encamped with their backs to the sea (Exodus 14:1-2), the Lord still desires to communicate something to the Egyptian Pharaoh. "Pharaoh will think, 'The Israelites are wandering around the land in confusion, hemmed in by the desert'" (Exodus 14:3). God asserts, "I will harden Pharaoh's heart, and he will pursue them. But I will gain glory for myself through Pharaoh and his army, and the Egyptians will know that I am the LORD" (Exodus 14:4). When Pharaoh hears that the Israelites have gone, he is furious and declares "What have we done? We have let the Israelites go and have lost their services!" (Exodus 14:5). Pharaoh sends the Egyptian army after these rabble to the seaside where they are gathered (Exodus 14:7-9).

The Ancient Israelites, having seen the plagues that the Lord enacted upon Egypt, see the Egyptian chariots "marching after them. They were terrified and cried out to the LORD" (Exodus 14:10). But then they chastise Moses, "Was it because there were no graves in Egypt that you brought us to the desert to die? What have you done to us by bringing us out of Egypt? Didn't we say to you in Egypt, 'Leave us alone; let us serve the Egyptians'? It would have been better for us to serve the Egyptians than to die in the desert!" (Exodus 14:11-12). Answering the clamor of people, Moses says *hityatzbu u're'u et'yeshuat ADONAI*: "stand firm and see the salvation of the LORD" (Exodus 14:13, RSV). "The LORD will fight for you" (Exodus 14:14). Up to this moment, the focus of disobedience and rebellion to HaShem has been on the Egyptian Pharaoh; now it shifts to the people of Israel themselves and whether they will believe in their God and His power.

We all know the scene far too well. At the moment of disbelief for the Israelites, "Moses stretched out his hand over the sea, and all that night the LORD drove the sea back with a strong east wind and turned it into dry land. The waters were divided, and the Israelites went through the sea on dry ground, with a wall of water on their right and on their left" (Exodus 14:21-22). The horde of several hundred thousand makes their way, albeit carefully, on the land provided to them. The pillar of fire and cloud keeps the Egyptian army at bay (Exodus 14:24), and they recognize "Let's get away from the Israelites! The LORD is fighting for them against Egypt" (Exodus 14:25).

Still, the stupidity of the Pharaoh compels the Egyptians to follow in after the Israelites (Exodus 14:28). The Lord commands Moses, "Stretch out your hand over the sea so that the waters may flow back over the Egyptians and their chariots and horsemen" (Exodus 14:26), and the force is decimated with not one of them surviving. One can now validly wonder why there is no record of the Exodus in Egyptian history. The god Pharaoh was defeated by HaShem the God of Israel—a God of slaves—in battle. Gods do not make mistakes, and so why would Egypt want to remember such catastrophes, failures, and blunders brought on them by Pharaoh, the son of Ra? Yet for His people, "when the Israelites saw the great power of the LORD displayed against the Egyptians, the people feared the LORD and put their trust in him and in Moses his servant" (Exodus 14:31). Miriam and the women of Israel begin dancing in praise to Him (Exodus 15:20-21).

A song, the *shirat ha'yam* or the Song of the Sea, is commissioned to remember what happened to the Egyptian armies. It proclaims "The LORD is my strength and my song; he has become my salvation" (Exodus 15:2), speaking of the fall of Pharaoh's chariots (Exodus 15:4-5) and the great majesty of God (Exodus 15:7). HaShem as Creator has dominion over the sea to swallow up His enemies

Messianic Spring Holiday Helper

(Exodus 15:8), as the people ask “Who among the gods is like you, O LORD? Who is like you—majestic in holiness, awesome in glory, working wonders?” (Exodus 15:11). So significant is this Song of the Sea, that it even conveys a message to the Canaanites whose land has been promised to Israel (Exodus 15:14-17; cf. Joshua 2:10).⁶

While the Israelites are a free people on the opposite shores of the Red Sea, **the process of their salvation has only begun.** Only three days into their journey, after seeing the mighty acts of deliverance via the hand of God, they start complaining. They wish to have sweet waters (Exodus 15:23-25). At this time, the people are first told “If you listen carefully to the voice of the LORD your God and do what is right in his eyes, if you pay attention to his commandments and keep all his decrees, I will not bring on you any of the disease I brought on the Egyptians, for I am the LORD, who heals you” (Exodus 15:26). Obedience to HaShem is now a clear requirement of His people. As they learn to obey Him, they will not face the same kinds of adversities that the Egyptians faced when God judged them for being obstinate.

This still does not phase the Israelites. Just about a month out of Egypt and in the Wilderness of Sin, the people again complain against Moses and Aaron, “If we had died by the LORD’s hand in Egypt! There we sat around pots of meat and ate all the food we wanted, but you have brought us out into this desert to starve this entire assembly to death” (Exodus 16:3). They do not appreciate the freedom that the Lord has given them, but as their Provider He gives them instructions on how to collect bread or the manna He sends from Heaven (Exodus 16:4-5), which would only last for an allotted time (Exodus 16:15-26). Moses still must remind the people that although they think of themselves as grumbling against him, they are actually grumbling against God (Exodus 16:6-8). The faithfulness of God is demonstrated, and so Moses is told “Take an omer of manna and keep it for the generations to come, so they can see the bread that I gave you in the desert when I brought you out of Egypt” (Exodus 16:33).

The initial challenges for the newly-free Israelites still keep coming. The Israelites complain because of lack of water: “Why did you bring us up out of Egypt to make us and our children and livestock die of thirst?” (Exodus 17:3). Moses is told by the Lord, “take in your hand the staff with which you struck the Nile, and go. I will stand there before you by the rock at Horeb. Strike the rock, and water will come out of it for the people to drink” (Exodus 17:6). While the thirst of the Israelites is quenched, Moses “called the place Massah and Meribah because the Israelites quarreled and because they tested the LORD saying, ‘Is the LORD among us or not?’” (Exodus 17:7; cf. Psalm 95:8; Hebrews 3:8).

Now encamped at Rephidim, the Amalekites come and attack Israel. Joshua is told by Moses to take a force and go out and fight them, as he would stand on top of a hill watching, holding out the staff that God gave him (Exodus 17:8-9). The fight went well “As long as Moses held up his hands, the Israelites were winning, but whenever he lowered his hands the Amalekites were winning” (Exodus 17:11). “Aaron and Hur held his hands up... So Joshua overcame the Amalekite army with his sword” (Exodus 17:12, 13). Hence we see the beginnings of a long, protracted hostility between Israel and the Amalekites (Exodus 17:14-15).

⁶ Consult this writer’s article “The Song of Moses and God’s Mission for His People.”

Now approaching the third month out of Egypt, Moses and his father-in-law, Jethro the priest of Midian, have a reunion along with Moses' wife and sons (Exodus 18:2-8). He attests to have heard of the plagues HaShem dispensed upon Egypt, and the deliverance He had accomplished for the people of Israel (Exodus 18:1, 9-12). Jethro gives Moses advice on how to delegate responsibility among the leaders of Israel so he alone will not have to judge each individual dispute and be worn out (Exodus 18:13-26).

The Israelites finally arrive at Mount Sinai, *ha'har* or "the mountain" (Exodus 19:2). Moses ascends this mountain to speak to HaShem concerning His will for Israel. The Lord says "if you obey me fully and keep my covenant, then out of all nations you will be my treasured possession. Although the whole earth is mine, you will be for me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation" (Exodus 19:5). Although they do not yet understand it, **God is already speaking to Israel about their future service unto Him as His intermediaries to the world.** Returning to the people, the Israelite assembly unanimously declares "We will do everything the LORD has said" (Exodus 19:8). A very significant and awesome time of theophany then ensues, with the people of Israel being told to consecrate themselves (Exodus 19:10, 15, 22) as God's Divine presence will engulf the mountain before them. "Mount Sinai was covered with smoke, because the LORD descended upon it in fire. The smoke billowed up from it like smoke from a furnace, the whole mountain trembled violently, and the sound of the trumpet grew louder and louder. Then Moses spoke and the voice of God answered him" (Exodus 19:19). He goes up to the top of the mountain a second time, and one of the most important events in human history occurs.

The *aseret ha'davarim* or Ten Words (more commonly called the Ten Commandments) are the first that are delivered from God, to His servant Moses (Exodus 20:1-17). It is quite significant that while HaShem will punish those who commit idolatry against Him (Exodus 20:4), "to the third and fourth generation of those who hate me" (Exodus 20:5), He will show "love to a thousand generations of those who love me and keep my commandments" (Exodus 20:6). No deity in the Ancient Near East, either those of Egypt or of Canaan, would ever make such promises. The Israelites stand beneath Sinai in fear and at a distance (Exodus 20:18). They have told Moses, "Speak to us yourself and we will listen. But do not have God speak to us or we will die" (Exodus 20:19). Moses indicates, "God has come to test you, so that the fear of God will be with you to keep you from sinning" (Exodus 20:20).

While on Mount Sinai, Moses receives additional instructions from the Lord. These concern the construction of proper altars (Exodus 20:22-26), laws regarding servitude within Israel (Exodus 21:2-11), personal injuries and appropriate reparations (Exodus 21:12-36), a respect of property and warnings against theft and shortdealings (Exodus 22:1-15), various social responsibilities including proper sexuality among the people (Exodus 21:16-31), how the people are to respect justice (Exodus 23:1-9) and give their land a Sabbath rest (Exodus 23:10-13), and how the people are to gather three times a year for specific festivals (Exodus 23:14-17). The Lord promises to send His angel ahead of the people, and for them not to adopt the ways of the Canaanites and their gods (Exodus 23:20-32).

The seventy elders are allowed to come closer to Moses while on the mountain, and the people declare once again "Everything the LORD has said we will

Messianic Spring Holiday Helper

do" (Exodus 24:3), along with a written transcription (Exodus 24:4). An altar is built for HaShem and sacrifices are made. Blood from those sacrifices is sprinkled on the people, testifying to their commitment before Him (Exodus 24:6-8). The elders of Israel get to witness a greater manifestation of God's presence than they had ever seen before (Exodus 24:9-10). Moses goes up to the summit of Mount Sinai to receive the Ten Words written on stone (Exodus 24:12-14). "When Moses went up on the mountain, the cloud covered it, and the glory of the LORD settled on Mount Sinai...To the Israelites the glory of the LORD looked like a consuming fire on top of the mountain. Then Moses entered the cloud as he went up on the mountain. And he stayed on the mountain forty days and forty nights" (Exodus 24:15-18).

On Mount Sinai, Moses is surrounded by the presence of God. Not surprisingly, the commandments he is given by the Lord concern how His presence is to manifest itself in the midst of the congregation of Israel. Moses is told "have them make a sanctuary for me, and I will dwell among them. Make this tabernacle and all its furnishings exactly like the pattern I will show you" (Exodus 25:8-9).

The elements of the Tabernacle include: the Ark of the Covenant (Exodus 25:10-22), the Table of Showbread (Exodus 25:23-30), and the lampstand or *menorah* (Exodus 25:31-40). The Tabernacle, a traveling tent structure, is likewise to be constructed according to a pattern and be elaborate (Exodus ch. 26). There is to be an altar for burnt offerings (Exodus 27:1-8), and a courtyard (Exodus 27:9-19). Only consecrated oil is to be used in worship (Exodus 27:20), and the priests who serve in the Tabernacle are to be of the highest caliber with only the appropriate garments (Exodus chs. 28-29). Other elements such as the altar of incense (Exodus 30:1-10), special money (Exodus 30:11-16), a basin for washing (Exodus 30:17-21), anointing oil (Exodus 30:22-33), and incense (Exodus 30:34-38) all enhance the holiness of this enterprise. God gives a special knowledge to the craftsmen Bezalel and Oholiab to make the sacred objects (Exodus 31:1-11).⁷

Concurrent with His theme to dwell among His people, HaShem is sure to tell Moses, "You must observe my Sabbaths. This will be a sign between me and you for the generations to come, so you may know that I am the LORD, who makes you holy" (Exodus 31:12). Failure to observe the Sabbath meant certain death for the Ancient Israelites who transgressed (Exodus 31:14-16), as they would be skewing God's original desire in Creation for human beings to commune with Him (Exodus 31:17). Finally after emphasizing this, the Lord "gave [Moses] the two tablets of the Testimony, the tablets of stone inscribed by the finger of God" (Exodus 31:18).

As Moses is surrounded by the presence of the Eternal, the Israelites return to their cycle of being impatient and grumble. "When the people saw that Moses was so long in coming down from the mountain, they gathered around Aaron and said, 'Come, make us gods who will go before us. As for this fellow Moses who brought us up out of Egypt, we don't know what has happened to him'" (Exodus 31:1). Aaron succumbs to the people's demands, asking them to gather gold. He fashions

⁷ While some try to find secret or hidden meanings behind every single design of the Tabernacle, it is better for us to remember that the Lord is working within the religious expectations of the people of the Ancient Near East. Far be it from the Tabernacle being the First Temple "read back" or "microscoped" into the "mythology" of the Exodus as purported by many past liberal theologians, there were many traveling tent shrines in the ANE. Furthermore, the great significance of the poles, rings, and ropes may just *actually be* that they kept the Tabernacle structure from falling down! The specificity and elaborate nature of the Tabernacle must first be understood as a testament to the holiness of the structure and how God expects it to reflect His majesty.

a golden calf, and perhaps intending it to be a representative for HaShem or some kind of consort for Him or any number of possible things, Aaron actually tells Israel “These are your gods, O Israel, who brought you up out of Egypt” (Exodus 31:4). He compounds his own sin by then declaring, “Tomorrow there will be a festival to the LORD” (Exodus 31:5), and so the Israelites rebel against the One True God and indulge themselves before the idol (Exodus 31:6).

The Lord promptly tells Moses, “Go down, because your people, whom you brought up out of Egypt, have become corrupt. They have been quick to turn away from what I commanded them” (Exodus 32:7-8a). A unique scene then takes place, as the Lord tells Moses, “Now leave me alone so that my anger may burn against them and that I may destroy them. Then I will make you into a great nation” (Exodus 32:10). Moses entreats his God, “why should your anger burn against your people, whom you brought out of Egypt with great power and a mighty hand? Why should the Egyptians say, ‘It was with evil intent that he brought them out, to kill them in the mountains and to wipe them off the face of the earth?’” (Exodus 32:11-12). Did God deliver Israel only to wipe them out in the desert? What message would this send to the Egyptians? **It would not be consistent with the mercy of which He spoke when delivering the Ten Commandments** (cf. Exodus 20:5-6). Moses reminds God about the promises He made to multiply the Patriarchs’ seed (Exodus 32:13), and so He does not destroy the people (Exodus 32:14).

Moses descends Mount Sinai, showing Joshua the tablets of the Ten Commandments (Exodus 32:15-16). The two of them encounter the Israelites in revelry before the golden calf, and so Moses’ “anger burned and he threw the tablets out of his hands, breaking them to pieces at the foot of the mountain” (Exodus 32:19). The calf is taken and ground into powder, scattered into water for the Israelites to drink (Exodus 32:20). Aaron’s response to *why* he had fashioned the calf is patently weak: “they gave me the gold, and I threw it into the fire, and out came this calf!” (Exodus 32:24). To quell any further rebellion against HaShem, Moses rallies the Levites to himself who are to go and kill those who “were running wild” (Exodus 32:25, cf. vs. 28-29). Moses returns to God’s presence on Mount Sinai, and a plague is unleashed upon the Israelites because of their worship of the golden calf (Exodus 32:35). But most significantly, the fact that the Lord did not destroy *all of the people* because of their rebellion, is a **great indication that He is different from all of the other gods of Planet Earth**. All of the other Ancient Near Eastern deities would have wiped out their people without any second thoughts.

As things begin to stabilize in the camp of Israel, Moses sets up a special Tent of Meeting, where the business of administering Israel was to be conducted (Exodus 33:7-8). The presence of the Lord would frequently manifest itself at the Tent of Meeting (Exodus 33:9-11), and most of the intimate one-on-one communication He would have with Moses would occur here. HaShem clearly tells Moses, “My Presence will go with you, and I will give you rest” (Exodus 33:14). The leader of Israel will later get to actually see the “back” of God, but not His face, witnessing a greater manifestation of His goodness and compassion (Exodus 33:19-20).

The Lord does not cast aside His chosen people. He commissions Moses to once again ascend Mount Sinai, but this time chisel for himself a second set of Ten Commandments (Exodus 34:1-5). Moses recognizes what God is doing by

Messianic Spring Holiday Helper

proclaiming “The LORD, the LORD, the compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness, maintaining love to thousands, and forgiving wickedness, rebellion and sin. Yet he does not leave the guilty unpunished; he punishes the children and their children for the sin of the fathers to the third and fourth generation” (Exodus 34:6-7). We are disadvantaged as people in the Twenty-First Century to read these words, because too many place an emphasize on curses or punishments that are to only pass down to the third and forth generations, in light of what the mercy and compassion of God truly mean when set against the religious background of the Thirteenth Century B.C.E. ***No other gods of the period offered such beneficence!*** HaShem is truly unique by displaying these great qualities, and provides for forgiveness and restitution (cf. Exodus 34:8-9)!

It is at this point where God states His definitive intention to enter into a covenant relationship with Israel (Exodus 34:10). Their salvation thus far has been a very rocky road since the parting of the Red Sea, but now He is preparing to train the people as to what it means to be His holy witnesses in the world. By obeying Him, the pagan inhabitants of Canaan will be driven out (Exodus 34:11). But Israel is reminded, “Break down their altars, smash their sacred stones and cut down their Asherah poles. Do not worship any other god, for the LORD, whose name is Jealous, is a jealous God” (Exodus 34:13; cf. 17). HaShem desires the complete and total loyalty of His people! He then repeats to Israel some of the important things of what it means to be His people (Exodus 34:17-26), and these things are all transcribed in the official record (Exodus 34:27). When returning from the mountain, Moses shines with the glory of God so significantly that he must place a veil over his face (Exodus 34:29-35).

The remainder of the Book of Exodus describes how the Tabernacle was constructed, the materials used were collected, and how some specific people were used in its assembly (Exodus chs. 35-40). One year from their departure from Egypt, the Tabernacle of the Lord is finally consecrated (Exodus 40:17), and the people of Israel have a sanctuary in their midst with which they can formally relate to their God. After Moses completes the final work, “the cloud covered the Tent of Meeting, and the glory of the LORD filled the tabernacle...In all the travels of the Israelites, whenever the cloud lifted from above the tabernacle, they would set out; but if the cloud did not lift, they did not set out—until the day it lifted. So the cloud of the LORD was over the tabernacle by day, and fire was in the cloud by night, in the sight of all the house of Israel during all their travels” (Exodus 40:34, 36-38). **The Israelites were now ready to enter into the great purpose that God had for them,** following Him at His lead.

We reflect on these events 3,300 years after they took place. We are undeniably affected by films such as The Ten Commandments or Prince of Egypt, each of which gives an artistic interpretation of the events. But the Biblical text tells us things much more significant than Hollywood ever can! When examining the message of Exodus, we are given the two important sides to the salvation message. Salvation begins by the Lord God directly intervening in the lives of human beings via His deliverance through the Red Sea, and salvation continues by being brought to His mountain and given His Instruction for holy living. As we grow in faith, we are trained and molded by God so that we can serve as priests in the world—intermediaries between HaShem and the rest of the world

commissioned to declare His goodness. We also remember that the Lord is very patient with us when we do falter, and He will often restrain the full force of His judgment.

Understanding the dynamic themes of the Book of Exodus is one of the most important things that today's Messianic movement can do. The unique messages that Exodus has, played an extremely important role in the development of Messianism and the concept of the Messiah serving as a "second Moses." They formed a substantial part of Messianic expectation and prophecy accomplished by Yeshua, and certainly Exodus helped inform the Apostles' worldview in the First Century. Yeshua the Messiah is certainly our Passover Lamb, but we have so much *more* to consider when it comes to Exodus, that it is overwhelming with all of the lessons to be considered and learned, although it is also very simple.

How are we to be led on our own exodus out of sin, into not only a new birth via the cross, but also a new life as we approach God's mountain? Exodus thematically teaches us about justification and sanctification—being forgiven of sin *and* growing in God's grace—concepts which we can never overemphasize! How we learn to appreciate the message of Exodus as today's Messianic community will not be a huge challenge if we truly desire to be a people who can accomplish the Lord's purpose for us.⁸

⁸ Consult the entry for the Book of Exodus in *A Survey of the Tanach for the Practical Messianic* for a summary of its date, composition, etc.