

PART TWO

Exodus

THESE ARE THE NAMES

Chapter 11	Macroview of Exodus	177
Chapter 12	The River and the Bush (1 – 4)	187
Chapter 13	The Plagues and the Sea (5:1 – 15:21)	201
Chapter 14	The Wilderness and the Mountain (15:22 – 24:18)	221
Chapter 15	The Rebellion and the Dwelling (25 – 30)	239

◀ **MT. SINAI.** The high mountains region in Central Sinai near Mt. Sinai.

The Lord descended to the top of Mount Sinai and called Moses to the top of the mountain.

—Exodus 19:20

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Macroview of Exodus

GETTING STARTED

▶ *Focus Question*

What is the story of the book of Exodus?

▶ *Look for These Terms*

- filling
- Genesis-shaped
- presence
- remember
- tabernacle
- tent of meeting

A READING

Figuring out the story of Exodus is challenging. As the book unfolds, the reader may think, in each subsequent section, this is what the story is. The great acts of God—the exodus, provision in the wilderness, his word at the mountain, the plans for his dwelling place among Israel—are each oriented toward a more basic issue. The account of the rebellion with the golden calf displays the problem. How can God’s presence dwell among a nation of wicked revolutionaries? But

that is not quite right. Better, how can sinful rebels bear the presence of the holy Creator? They cannot—that is the problem.

The movement of the story, at least relative to God and Israel broadly speaking, can be thought of in stages. God brought Israel to the mountain, descended on it, and gave his word and his glory to the people (see Figure 11-a). Each time God and the people drew closer

How can sinful rebels bear the presence of the holy Creator? They cannot — that is the problem.

AN OUTLINE

A. From Egypt (1:1–15:21)

1. The Egyptians oppress Israel and throw their infant boys into the river (1–2)
2. The bush (3–4)
3. The plagues and the Passover (5:1–13:16)
4. God throws the Egyptian army into the sea (13:17–15:21)

B. Through the Wilderness (15:22–18:27)

1. Israel's grumbling and God's provision (15:22–17:7)
2. The Amalekites defeated (17:8–16)
3. Judges appointed over Israel (18)

C. At the Mountain (19–40)

1. The covenant with the people (19–24)
2. The dwelling instructions (25–31)
3. The rebellion and the revelation (32–34)
4. The dwelling constructed and filled (35–40)

together, the problem of his presence grew. Here I will consider the stages of the story, particularly as they situate the predicament of Israel in God's presence.



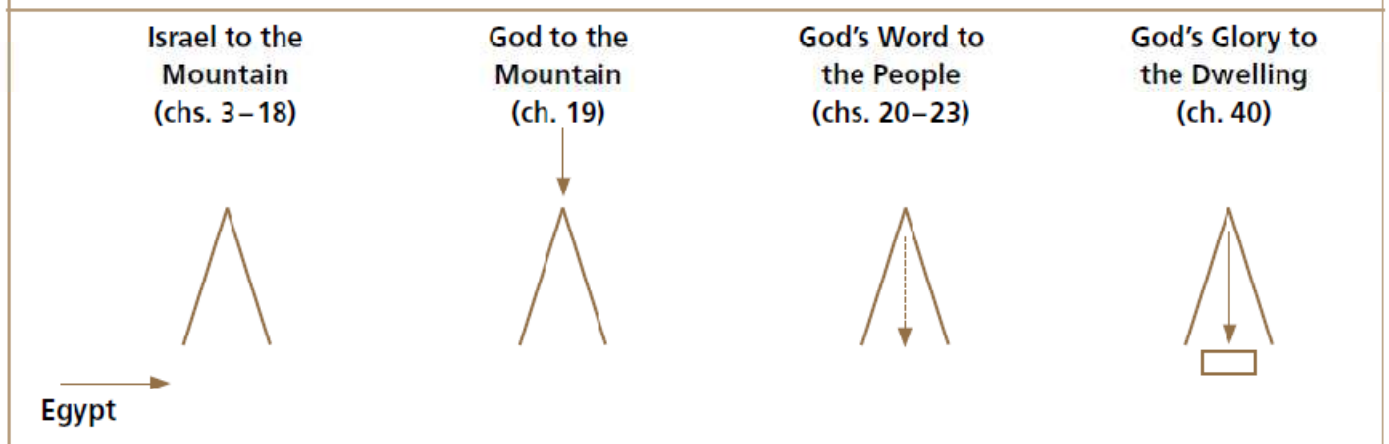
What is the significance of the progressive proximity of God and Israel in the book of Exodus?

First, Yahweh delivered Israel from oppression and brought his people to the mountain. The situation triggering the entire chain of events that constitute the Exodus story was that Israel filled the land of Egypt. This Egyptian problem was really caused by the creational and covenant blessing of Israel.

They multiplied and became numerous because the people were fulfilling the commission to humanity—they were fruitful and multiplied (see Gen. 1; 9). Moreover, they were beginning to realize God's word of promise to Abraham (see 12; 15; 17). The fruitfulness of Israel became the target of the Egyptian oppression. The Egyptians attacked the life God gave his people and in doing so they were defying the Creator.

The basis of the salvation of the Israelites from bondage was that God remembered his word to Abraham. "The Israelites groaned in their slavery and cried out, and their cry for help because of their slavery went up to God. God heard their groaning *and he*

Figure 11-a: The Progressive Proximity of God and Israel in the Book of Exodus



remembered his covenant with Abraham, with Isaac and with Jacob. So God looked on the Israelites and was concerned about them” (Ex. 2:23b–25, italics added). When God “remembers,” this is no mere mental act but an enactment and embodiment of God’s faithfulness to his word. The remainder of Exodus—as well as the Torah, and indeed, the Bible—is a consequence of the word of promise to Abraham.

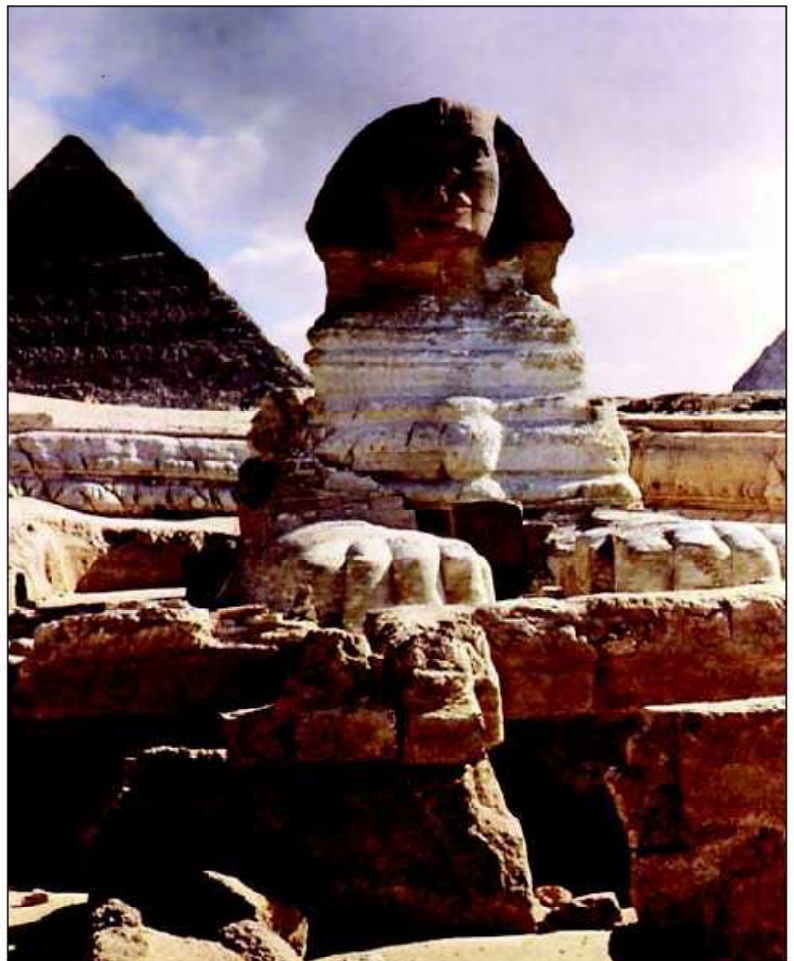


How is the redemption of Israel related to God’s word to Abraham?

Yahweh remembered his word to Abraham and called a deliverer. Moses brought God’s plagues against Pharaoh. The world God had created became a tool of his judgment against the Egyptians. In Exodus 1 the Egyptian oppression escalated to the point where they attempted to weaken Israel systematically by throwing their infant boys into the river. The judgment of Yahweh against the Egyptians increased through a series of plagues

until he killed their firstborn children. Furthermore, in response to Pharaoh’s pursuing Israel into the wilderness, Yahweh threw the Egyptian army into the sea.

The sphinx (66 feet high and 240 feet long) and pyramid (40 stories high)



Then Moses and the Israelites sang this song to Yahweh: “I will sing to Yahweh, for he is highly exalted. *The horse and its rider he has hurled into the sea. . . . Pharaoh’s chariots and his army he has hurled into the sea.* The best of Pharaoh’s officers are drowned in the

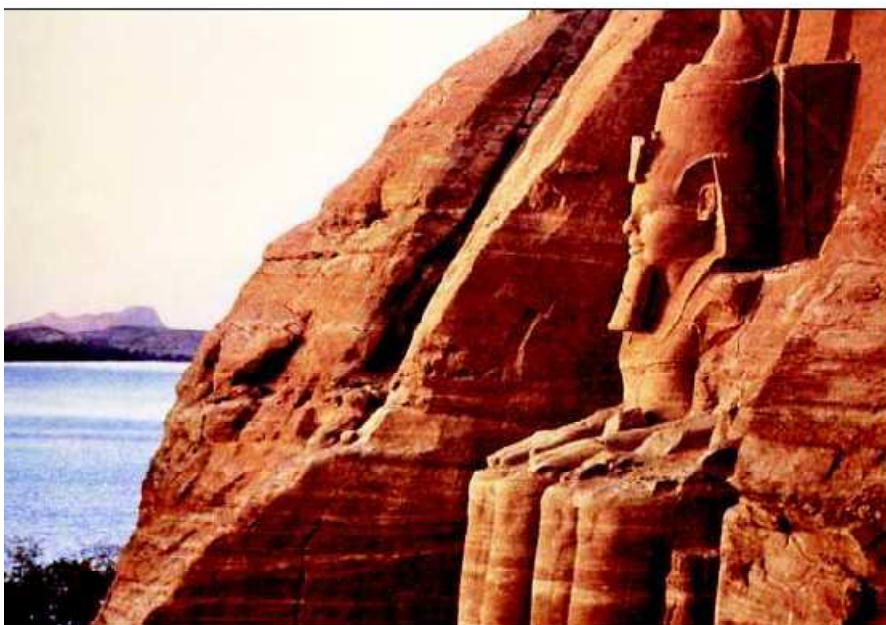
The symmetry of God’s wrath against the Egyptians reveals the terrifying power of his word.

Red Sea.” . . . Miriam sang to them: “Sing to Yahweh, for he is highly exalted. *The horse and its rider he has hurled into the sea.*” (15:1, 4, 21, italics added)

The symmetry of God’s wrath against the Egyptians reveals the terrifying power of his word. After God defeated Pharaoh, Moses led the people through the wilderness. The one who saw the burning bush on the mountain led the people back to the foot of that same mountain.

Second, God’s glory descended on the mountain and he spoke the Ten Words to Israel. Yahweh’s voice was

Figure of Rameses II at Abu-Simbel



terror for the Israelites. They begged Moses to serve as mediator between them and their God. Moses agreed, and God approved the arrangement. Moses ascended the mountain to represent the people to God. This act was the beginning of forty long years of pleading the people’s case, or better, pleading that God would be merciful to the rebellious Israelites. Moses received God’s word and acted as his prophet, speaking his will to the people.

On the mountain Moses received the Ten Words in writing, the various instructions for the “book of the covenant” (24:7—most likely referring to chs. 21–23), and extensive instructions for the dwelling where God’s glory would reside in the midst of his people. The instructions for the “dwelling” (traditionally called the “tabernacle” but also called the “tent of meeting”) occupy six chapters (chs. 25–31). The term *tabernacle* denotes its function as the dwelling place of God while *tent of meeting* signifies it as the place of the revelatory conferences he held with Moses. The construction of the dwelling also fills six chapters, repeating many details in a slightly different order (chs. 35–40). Exactly in the middle of these twelve chapters on the dwelling is the remarkable account of the people’s rebellion and God’s revelation.



Why was the tabernacle sometimes called the *tabernacle* and sometimes the *tent of meeting*?

The narrative location of the people's rebellion evokes a grotesque image for readers, falling as it does between the carefully detailed instructions for, and the construction of, the dwelling of Israel's holy God. The holiness of Yahweh mandated that the tent of meeting had to be just so. If his holiness is neglected, even in a small detail, people will die. The depth of the people's audacious sin radiates from its central place within the narrative of the dwelling of God. This stark juxtaposition of his holiness and their rebellion raises the biggest problem of the story. The most serious difficulty is not Pharaoh's stubbornness but that of the chosen people. If Yahweh brought his terrors to the defiant Egyptian ruler, then how can Israel avoid his wrath?



What is the importance of the rebellion with the golden calf?

The strength of God's word to Israel's ancestors was tested when the people rebelled against him at the base of Mount Sinai. Israel's rebellion incited God's wrath to the point that he intended to wipe them out, excepting only Moses. It was Moses' prayer invoking the promise to Abraham that averted God's judgment:

“Turn from your fierce anger; relent and do not bring disaster on your people. *Remember your servants Abraham, Isaac, and Israel, to whom you swore by your own self:*

‘I will make your descendants as numerous as the stars in the sky and I will give your descendants all this land I promised them, and it will be their inheritance forever.’” Then Yahweh relented. (32:12b–14a, italics added)

The echo of God's word to Abraham reminds readers that this was the reason for the exodus itself, the reason the people were brought to the mountain. What was at stake at the beginning and the end of the book was the power of Yahweh's eternal word.

It is thus, within this context of extreme opposites, that the wonder of Yahweh's character is revealed. Yahweh forgives. The surprise is that the combination of his holiness and the people's sinfulness does not bring disaster. Rather, God reveals himself, in part, to Moses. His character toward human rebels is expressed, at his discretion, by the phenomena of compassion and forgiveness. The Exodus story displays God's wrath against the hardhearted Pharaoh and his grace toward the defiant, disobedient Israelites. The different divine acts cannot be explained by differences between Pharaoh and the people. According to the Torah both were wicked and stubborn. The reasons for his different actions remain hidden from the eyes of mortals, even Moses. The most that we can see, or rather hear, are the effects of God's word, whether to Abraham or Moses:

The reasons for his different actions remain hidden from the eyes of mortals, even Moses.

“Yahweh, Yahweh, the compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness” (34:5b).

Third, the glory of God filled the tent of meeting. The end of the book echoes the beginning, forming a frame to enclose the story between. The connection between these passages provides the reader with clues to hear the story.

These are the names of the sons of Israel who went to Egypt with Jacob, each with his family: Reuben, Simeon, Levi and Judah; Issachar, Zebulun and Benjamin; Dan and Naphtali; Gad and Asher

Joseph was already in Egypt . . . the Israelites were fruitful and multiplied greatly and became exceedingly numerous, so that the land was filled with them. (1:1–4, 5b, 7)

Then the cloud covered the Tent of Meeting, and the glory of Yahweh filled the dwelling. Moses could not enter the Tent of Meeting because the cloud had settled upon it, and the glory of Yahweh filled the dwelling. (40:34–35, italics added)

The story moves from Israel’s “filling” of the land of Egypt, dwelling in its midst, to the glory of God’s presence “filling” the tent within Israel’s community.

Exodus closes at the apex toward which the narrative has been moving since chapter 1. Just as the Egyptians could not tolerate Israel filling their

land, so too Moses could not remain in the dwelling once God’s glory came upon it. The context of Exodus makes Moses’ inability to withstand the presence of God’s glory most remarkable. Moses alone had been chosen by the people to meet with him and hear his voice. Yahweh spoke to Moses, uniquely, “face to face, as a man speaks to his friend” (33:11). Thus, when God’s glory filled the tent of meeting forcing Moses out, it symbolized the intensity of his presence (40:34–35). He had condescended in an act of graciousness to reside with the people.

At first it seemed as if the problems of the Israelites were external—the tyrannical Egyptians and the barren desert. God delivered them from these because of his word to Abraham. He gave them a new word from the mountain and instructions for his dwelling. This caused the real problem. How could these rebels bear the presence of God’s glory? They committed damnable acts against his word even as it was being written. The only way for God to dwell among his people, therefore, was to condescend to them in grace and forgiveness. He did not relax his standards but forgave them in light of the power of his word to the Hebrew ancestors.

The progressive movement of the story both reflects and depends on Genesis (see Enns). The book of Exodus is a complete story, an integrated and interrelated whole, yet it is also the second part of the Torah. As the second book in the series, it needs to

At first it seemed like the problems of the Israelites were external—the tyrannical Egyptians and the barren desert.

be read in light of its prequel. This book is “Genesis-shaped.” It begins with Israel’s enjoying the creational blessing of their explosive population growth. The exodus event itself is based on God’s word to Abraham (see Gen. 15:13–16). Exodus tells the story of the creation of Israel by the power of God’s word. Whereas the Genesis story began with God making a garden for the humans, Exodus ends with Israel making a dwelling place for God. The highpoint of the Exodus narrative is God’s coming to dwell with his people. What would it mean for the Creator to reside with Israel? Part of the answer to this question is the book of Leviticus.



How is the book of Exodus related to the book of Genesis?

ANOTHER LOOK

The Exodus narrative itself moves in stages between the Israelites filling Egypt to God filling the dwelling; that

is, he brought Israel to the mountain, descended on the mountain, and gave his word to Israel; finally, his glory filled the dwelling. Thus, the progressive proximity between Yahweh and his people—the plot of the book—correlates with the geographically rooted structure of the book (see Table 11-A).

Within the Torah there is a symmetry in the central section (i.e., Exodus–Leviticus–Numbers). The symmetry is especially seen when Exodus is reread from the vantage point of Numbers, the main connection being Mount Sinai. The people arrive at the mountain in Exodus 19 and camp there through Numbers 10. In the middle of this three-book series is Leviticus, the instruction of Yahweh while the people are encamped at the mountain. The macro-story line, therefore, moves to and from the mountain. The importance of the Sinai event, spanning the middle of the Torah, should not be downplayed (see Milgrom, xvii–xviii).

The relationship between Exodus and Numbers can be expanded by comparing three parts of each, most

Table 11-A: The Progressive Proximity of God and his People and the Structure of Exodus

The Proximity of God and His People within Exodus Itself	The Structure of Exodus within the Torah
God brought Israel to the mountain (1–18)	from Egypt (1:1–15:21)
	through the desert (15:22–18:27)
God came down upon the mountain (19)	at the mountain (19–40)
God’s word granted to the people (20–24)	
God’s glory filled the dwelling (25–40)	

Table 11-B: The Structure of Exodus and Numbers Compared

Exodus			Numbers		
from Egypt	through the wilderness	at the mountain	the camp at Sinai	wilderness journeys	plains of Moab
1:1–15:21	15:22–18:27	19–40	1:1–10:10	10:11–21:35	22–36

importantly the wilderness journeys (see Table 11-B; also see Smith, 205–6). The first section of Numbers narrates the specifics of the families within the camp before they leave the mountain (1:1–10:10). Comparing this with Exodus 19–40 offers important, though broad and general, insight. Whether considering the particularities of Yahweh’s dwelling or the people’s tribal community, both reflect the centrality of Yahweh and the primacy of his will. Looking at both Exodus 1–15 and Numbers 26–36 likewise highlights the preparations to leave Egypt and to enter the land of promise, respectively.

The wilderness narratives in Exodus 15–18 and Number 10–21 are a special case. The Numbers stories specifically echo many of the incidents recounted in the counterpart Exodus passages (see Table 20-E in Chapter 20). The stories of repetitive grumbling accent Israel’s moral shortcomings in the first and the second generation over the course of many years. The cohe-

sion of the wilderness stories through Exodus and Numbers is so great that Deuteronomy often treats all of the wilderness years as a single unit. Note, for example, “From the day you left Egypt until you arrived here [the plains of Moab], you have been rebellious against Yahweh” (Deut. 9:7).

The three-part structure of Exodus and Numbers complement each other within the larger structure of the Torah. Exodus moves from oppression in the land of Egypt through the wilderness to the mountain, the place where Yahweh’s commands and presence are granted to the people. Numbers moves from the camp in the shadow of Sinai through the wilderness to the plains of Moab, where the second generation of the redeemed community prepare to enter the land God promised to their ancestors.



How is the book of Exodus related to the book of Numbers?

INTERACTIVE WORKSHOP

▶ *Chapter Summary*

The story of Exodus builds in stages and reaches its highest level in the section of the rebellion and the revelation. The sinful people, in the presence of their holy God, are met with forgiveness and grace.

▶ *Can You Explain the Key Terms?*

- filling
- Genesis-shaped
- presence
- remember
- tabernacle
- tent of meeting

▶ *Challenge Questions*

1. What is the relationship between the exodus event, the giving of the law, and the larger story of the book of Exodus?
2. What are the main features of the relationship between Exodus and Genesis?
3. What is the significance of the fact that the account of the golden calf is located between the instructions for and the construction of the tent of meeting?

▶ *Advanced Questions*

1. How is interpretation affected by considering Exodus within the Torah as a whole versus regarding Exodus by itself?
2. What is the function of God's word of promise to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob within Exodus?
- 3*. What is the meaning of "remember" (*zkr*) within the context of Exodus 2 and 32?

▶ *Research Project Ideas*

Compare the beginning and the end of the book of Exodus.
Explain the ways that Exodus needs to be situated against Genesis.
Describe how Numbers affects the significance of Exodus.

▶ *The Next Step*

Enns, Peter. "Exodus." Pp. 146–52 in *New Dictionary of Biblical Theology*. Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 2000.
Leder, Arie C. "The Coherence of Exodus." *Calvin Theological Journal* 36 (2001): 251–69.
Milgrom, Jacob. *The JPS Torah Commentary: Numbers*. Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1990, xvii–xviii.
Rooker, M. R. "Theophany." Pp. 859–64, in *Dictionary of the Old Testament: Pentateuch*. Eds. T. Desmond Alexander and David W. Baker. Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 2003.
Smith, Mark S. "Matters of Space and Time in Exodus and Numbers." Pp. 182–207 in Christopher Seitz and Kathryn Greene-McCreight, eds. *Theological Exegesis: Essays in Honor of Brevard S. Childs*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999.