



**DAILY BIBLE
READING:
*EXODUS***

Chuck Lowe

EXODUS

What God said to them...

What God is saying to us...

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DAY 1

THE FULFILLMENT OF THE LAND PROMISE, STAGE ONE: LEAVING EGYPT FOR CANAAN

Exodus 1-40 Overview

The name 'Exodus' derives from the ancient Greek translation (the Septuagint, or LXX), meaning 'departure'. The name captures a prominent event from the book, but not its overall theme. In an overview of Exodus, two features are of primary interest: its thematic connection with Genesis, and its overall structure.

What God said to them. In Genesis, God created a pristine world, but humankind despoiled it. As part of a restorative process, God shifted focus to a single lineage, making three promises to Abraham: descendants, land, and international prominence. The bulk of Genesis tracks the incremental fulfillment of the first promise, at the expense of the second and third. By book's end, the fourth generation has increased to seventy, but famine has forced them out of Canaan into Egypt (Genesis 12-50). This has the side effect of making Yahweh seem to be only a minor clan deity.

Four centuries later, Exodus resumes the story with the promise of descendants largely fulfilled. Israel has reproduced so prolifically that their numbers alarm their host. Egyptian authorities implement various draconian

strategies to stifle their growth. The efforts backfire. Not only does Israel continue to reproduce unabated, they also abruptly exit Egypt for Canaan, jump-starting the fulfillment of the second Abrahamic promise of a homeland. Additionally, when the Egyptian army attempts to impede their departure, it is destroyed, fulfilling the curse provisions of the third promise. The process establishes God as warrior-king, true emperor of the world, and victor over Pharaoh and his patron deity (chapters 1-15a).

The remainder of the book sets out God's expectations for Israel: they are to live virtuously, and they are to worship him exclusively. In chapters 15b-24, Moses receives a summary of the Law to direct their behavior. In chapters 25-40, he receives the blueprint for construction and staffing of the tabernacle, as a home for God and a venue for his worship. Given the order and content of the themes, virtuous living and exclusive worship do not earn salvation, but are the appropriate response to God's grace in saving them from slavery in Egypt.

One more structural feature is fundamental to the message of Exodus. Its three parts are broken up by two uprisings. The incidents are all the more consequential as they directly violate revelation occurring at the very same time. As Israel is on the way to receive the Law at Mount Sinai, they rebel for lack of food and water (chapters 15b-18). Then, while Moses is atop Mount Sinai, obtaining instructions for the tabernacle, they commit idol worship (chapters 32-34).

These uprisings add a somber note to the triumphant tone of Exodus. Despite God's imperial status and his gracious interventions, Israel fails to show him appropriate respect: they neither obey him consistently nor worship him exclusively. For the most part, he responds with restraint, though he does kill several thousand of the offenders.

This is the four-part message of Exodus. As warrior-king and emperor of the world, God graciously intervenes on Israel's behalf (chapters 1-15a). He expects his beneficiaries to reciprocate by living rightly (chapters 15b-24), and by worshipping him exclusively (chapters 25-40). They fundamentally fail in both obligations, complaining against him (chapters 16-18), and worshipping the golden calf idol (chapters 32-34). Thus, overall, Exodus extends the storyline of Genesis somewhat further, and darker in tone.



What God is saying to us. The New Testament elaborates the four parts of Exodus similarly, though largely independently. In each case, Christ fulfills the theme to a greater degree than the original. For the moment, space permits only a quick overview. Subsequent readings will develop individual themes as they appear.

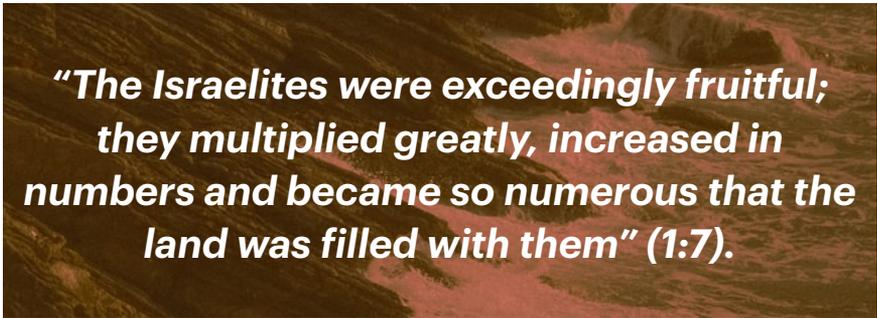
In Exodus, God redeems Israel from slavery in Egypt through the death of Passover lambs. In the gospel, Christ is the Passover lamb who redeems us from slavery to sin through his own atoning death (Exodus 1-15 cf. Matthew 26:1-30; Romans 3:21-26).

Jesus is not only our redeeming lamb, he also brings the fuller revelation of God, greater than the Law (Exodus 19-24 cf. Matthew 5-7). In fact, he is the revelation of God (John 1:17).

He is also the new and glorious tabernacle, the presence of God among his people (Exodus 25-40 cf. John 1:14). In another application of the motif, the tabernacle is a symbol of the heavenly sanctuary, where Christ serves as our high priest, interceding for us in the presence of God (Hebrews 8-9).

Finally, the New Testament also warns against repeating the sins of the wilderness generation. Otherwise, we will suffer the same judgments (1 Corinthians 10:1-13 cf. 5:6-13).

This, in broad strokes, is the message of Exodus, updated in the light of Christ. The readings that follow will flesh out the details.



DAY 2

THE STORY RESUMES

Exodus 1

Exodus is the second volume in an saga which spans five Old Testament books, because it was too long to fit on a single scroll. At the end of Genesis, Joseph anticipates that his descendants would eventually return from Egypt to their homeland in Canaan. Some four centuries later, Exodus resumes – and advances – the story.

What God said to them. The opening of Exodus recalls the end of Genesis. The first eight words of Exodus exactly repeat Genesis 46:8, and the first verses of Exodus summarize the list in Genesis 46 of migrants from Canaan into Egypt (verses 1-5). In the midst of continuity, there has been a notable development: the seventy ‘descendants of Jacob’ (verse 5) have swelled into a nation, the ‘descendants of Israel’ (verse 1).

Verses 6-7 announce the fulfillment of the first promise to Abraham: “The Israelites were exceedingly fruitful; they multiplied greatly, increased in numbers and became so numerous that the land was filled with them.” The narrator uses six different phrases to highlight their proliferation, drawing several from the original creation blessing: ‘fruitful’, ‘multiplied’, ‘increased’, ‘grew’, ‘greatly’, and ‘filled the earth’ (cf. Genesis 1:28; 9:1,7; 15:5; 17:2,6; 22:17; 26:4,23; 35:11).

Ironically, the growth of Israel threatens their growth. The new Pharaoh recognizes that they have become a 'people', much like his own 'people'. Fearing that they may become a 'fifth column', assisting Egypt's enemies in time of war, he launches a pogrom (verses 8-10).

His first strategy is to enslave the Israelites (fulfilling Genesis 15:13). The tactic misfires: the worse he abuses them, the faster they multiply (verses 11-14). He then attempts genocide through gendercide, ordering their midwives to kill all newborn boys. The midwives respond passive-aggressively, even 'trash-talking': "'Hebrew women are not like Egyptian women; they are vigorous and give birth before the midwives arrive.'" The Israelites continue to proliferate, and God rewards the midwives with families of their own (verses 15-21). Next, Pharaoh orders that every newborn boy be thrown into the Nile to drown (verse 22). The narrative pauses on this cliff-hanger.

Thus, Exodus intensifies the thematic tension of Genesis. God's promises progress: Israel has proliferated to the point that they now constitute a nation, and a danger to their host. The obstacles have also increased exponentially. In Genesis, the biggest threat to the promises of God may have been character flaws in the patriarchs. Now they face the wrath of the paranoid emperor of a superpower. Will Israel survive the coming onslaught?

From the beginning, the narrator hints at the eventual outcome. Pharaoh enslaves Israel, yet they increase. Pharaoh pressures the midwives, yet Israel increases. Now

he threatens their infant sons. With God as their ally, Israel will not falter. Ironically, the Pharaoh's efforts to thwart the first Abrahamic blessing actually advance the fulfillment of the second and third blessings. Knowing the end of the story from its beginning may reduce suspense, but it increases anticipation, as the audience gleefully awaits Pharaoh's humiliation and their ancestors' victory.



What God is saying to us. This first chapter continues the theme which ran throughout Genesis, but with increased intensity. God has spectacularly fulfilled his promise of descendants, but this provokes a destructive reaction from their host country. The threats were ferocious, and supported by a vast army. Yet the first audience would have had the benefit of hindsight: their very existence indicated that Israel survived the onslaught. What purpose would the narrative have served for them?

The Egyptian domination and pogrom were only the first of many fierce battles to threaten Israel's existence: the invasion of Canaan, Philistine rivalry, Assyrian and Babylonian conquests and exiles, Seleucid invasion, and Roman occupation, among others. Israel's survival – even proliferation – during this first oppression by a hostile superpower offers hope during future crises. With God as ally, Israel can prosper against all opponents.

This message rings all the more loudly in the aftermath of Jesus' crucifixion by imperial Rome. The image of the Lion-

Lamb encouraged the Church of Revelation to hold fast as it suffered under Roman persecution (Revelation 5). No less today, with God as protector, the Church survives – sometimes even thrives – in the face of ferocious opposition. Jesus builds his church, and the gates of Hades cannot overcome it (Matthew 16:18).

The message continues wherever God’s people are oppressed. They may not possess any of the usual instruments of power in this world, whether wealth, weapons, or cunning. Yet the threatened church survives under the patronage of God, and with the courage modeled by these peasant midwives. This is the message of Exodus 1 for Israel as they suffered oppression under subsequent empires. It remains the message for the Church wherever it is oppressed today.



DAY 3

INTERVENING ON BEHALF OF THE OPPRESSED

Exodus 2

Unlike modern biography, ancient narrative – including biblical narrative – typically begins when the hero reaches the public stage. Occasionally, though, the storyline includes a premonition of greatness at birth, or perhaps some early episode that anticipates the character's future role. Both types of biographical material appear in the opening of the Moses story.

What God said to them. Chapter 2 consists of two episodes with a conclusion. Thematic continuity runs through all three segments: intervention on behalf of oppressed Israel. The Pharaoh's daughter, the young-adult Moses, and God himself, all 'see' oppression of the Israelites, and intervene to save them.

Chapter 2 begins where chapter 1 left off: with the Pharaoh's decree that all newborn Hebrew boys be thrown into the Nile. When Moses is born, his mother hides him for three months, but then needs a more feasible long-term solution. She lays him in a basket (or 'ark'), waterproofed with pitch, redolent of Noah's ark. She places the basket with child in the shallows along the river bank, as his sister stands watch. Pharaoh's daughter 'sees' the basket and the crying baby.

Though she realizes that this is one of the infants whom her father wants to eradicate, she takes pity on him, and saves his life. She then hires Moses' mother to nurse him until he is ready to join Pharaoh's household (verses 1-10).

In the second episode, Moses reveals similar character. The baby who was rescued from oppression has become a man who rescues the oppressed, three times within two vignettes. First, he 'sees' an Egyptian striking a Hebrew laborer, and strikes the perpetrator. The next day, he finds one Hebrew beating another, and rebukes the aggressor, whose retort reveals that the previous day's murder is public knowledge. Moses flees Egypt. Arriving in Midian, he sits by a well. When some sisters arrive to water their family flocks, shepherds drive them away, so Moses intervenes again. In short order, he moves in with the family, marries one of the daughters, Zipporah, and they produce a son (verses 11-22).

The final paragraph builds on the preceding episodes. All Israel suffers under oppressive slavery. The narrator heaps up synonyms to express the depth of their despair: they groan, they cry out, they call out, they moan. Like Pharaoh's daughter and the young-adult Moses, God 'sees' them. He hears their cries, and is concerned about them (verses 23-25). This chapter, like the first, ends on a cliffhanger: Will God intervene to save the oppressed?

Pharaoh's daughter and Moses are not merely literary devices, foreshadowing the coming exodus. They are 'arguments from lesser to greater'. If a princess from the oppressing nation and a collaborator with the oppressive

regime are moved by compassion to save individual Israelites, surely God can be counted on to deliver the entire nation from their oppressors.

Why does this point need making? Why might it be in question? 'During that long period', the final paragraph begins. During much of the four hundred years that Israel dwells in Egypt, during the time leading up to the birth of Moses, during the time between his birth and his impetuous intervention, during the forty years of his life in Midian, the people of God suffer in slavery. 'During that long period', the question would press urgently on Israel: Does God not see our oppression? Does he not hear our groans? Will he not intervene?

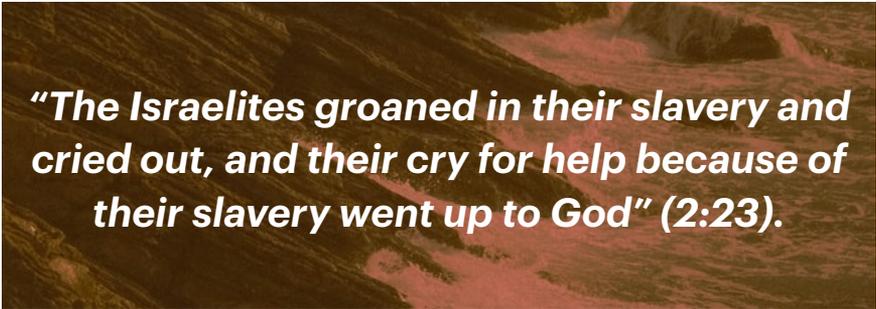


What God is saying to us. Israel will face other long periods of subjugation after this, troubling times which inevitably provoke pained questions: Does God not see our oppression? Does he not hear our groans? Will he not intervene? During those long periods when they find themselves occupied by an enemy power, or exiled in a foreign land, this passage, with the events that unfold from it, assures them that God tracks his people, that he 'sees' their suffering, and that in his time, he intervenes to rescue them from oppression.

The threat against the baby Moses anticipates a later episode in redemption history, when another baby similarly faces death threats from a paranoid tyrant. In that instance,

the Christ child is saved by prophetic dreams, by clever magi, and by flight into – rather than out of – Egypt. Like Moses, only greater, that baby grows into an adult who delivers God’s people from slavery to sin and Satan (Matthew 2:1-18).

Both the birth of Moses and the birth of Jesus hold out hope to the contemporary church wherever it suffers. The God who rescued Israel from slavery, and saved us from sin, can be trusted to ‘see’ and rescue his people from oppression.



DAY 4

MOSES' COMMISSIONING

Exodus 3:1-12

The outer limits of the commissioning are signaled by inclusion. In 3:1, Moses is shepherding the flock of his father-in-law, Jethro, based out of Midian. In 4:18, in response to the call of God, Moses takes leave of Jethro and Midian, in order to return to Egypt.

Compared with other biblical examples, the call of Moses is unusually long, because of his many objections and God's rebuttals. For ease of handling, we break the passage into two parts, considering the basic commission today, and the resistance-rebuttal addendum tomorrow.

What God said to them. *Commissioning is a recurring motif in both Old and New Testaments (e.g., Judges 6:11-24; Isaiah 6:1-13; Jeremiah 1:4-9; Acts 9:1-19). The motif typically includes, as here:*

- *setting (verses 1-3);*
- *theophany (verses 4-6);*
- *mission (verses 7-8);*
- *commissioning (verses 9-10);*
- *objection (verse 11);*
- *reassurance (verse 12).*

The purpose of the motif is to credential a divinely-appointed leader.

A burning bush on a holy mountain attracts Moses (verses 2-3). There God reveals himself as the patron deity of Israel since the days of the patriarchs (verses 4-6).

The mission and commissioning form a matching set. The mission recalls the previous chapter: God has 'seen' their misery, and heard their 'cries', so he has come down to rescue them from Egypt (verses 7-8). The commissioning repeats the mission, with a significant tweak: he has heard their 'cries' and 'seen' their oppression, so he sends Moses to bring them out of Egypt (verses 9-10). The point of the variation: God works through human means; Moses is his chosen instrument.

In the motif, the commissioning typically provokes a sense of inadequacy. Moses objects: "Who am I to do this?" God offers his standard response: "I will be with you." In Scripture, for God to 'be with' includes not only his presence, but also his assistance. To paraphrase: "The decisive factor is not who you are, but who I am" (verses 11-12).

In short, God commissions Moses to lead Israel out of slavery in Egypt, back to Canaan, their designated homeland. This initiative continues the overall theme of Genesis: the progressive fulfillment of the Abrahamic promises; in this case, the second promise (land), and, in part, the third (cursing those who curse Israel, punishing

Egypt). As in Genesis, the promises advance in the face of obstacles; in this case, the opposition of imperial Egypt.



What God is saying to us. A common application of this passage supposes that candidates for pastoral ministry or cross-cultural missions should first experience a 'divine call'. This misapplication of commissioning inhibits some who have the heart and gifts for vocational service, while providing a convenient excuse for others to avoid God-given responsibilities.

Such an application misconstrues Scripture at three points. First, in practice, the application tends to reduce the biblical pattern. Moses has exceptional, actual experiences: a miraculous theophany, a direct revelation, a personal commissioning, and appointment to an epoch-changing role. If we kept to this standard, few would become pastors or missionaries. So we are obliged to reduce the 'call' to some subjective, personal impression. That is a pale imitation of the biblical motif.

Secondly, in Scripture it is really only the most strategic leaders who have such callings; such as, Abraham, Samuel, David, Isaiah, Jesus, and Paul. Moses is unique among his generation, perhaps second only to Christ, across all time. He is not a paradigm for priests and Levites. So, today, he is not a pattern for pastors and missionaries.

The third way in which this application misuses Scripture is by neglecting the actual commission which Jesus bestowed on the Church during his final post-resurrection appearance. Much like God in Exodus 3, Jesus first establishes his authority. He then commissions his followers to make disciples of all nations. Finally, again like God in Exodus 3, he promises to 'be with' them, as they fulfill his commission. Which is to say, he promises to be with us, as we fulfill the commission he has given us (Matthew 28:18-20).

The parallel between God's commission of Moses, and Jesus' commission of his disciples, suggests another application. In every major point of Matthew 28 – his claim to authority, his commissioning of representatives, and his promise to 'be with' them – Jesus models himself on God. This is an implicit claim to divine status, and an invitation for us to worship him, as Moses worshipped God.

So, put positively, we apply this passage to our lives in two ways: by embracing our commission, without requiring the sort of special call that Moses receives here; and, by worshipping Christ as the Lord who commissions his Church, including us.



“Now, go. I am sending you to Pharaoh to bring my people the Israelites out of Egypt” (3:10).

DAY 5

“HERE AM I, BUT...”

Exodus 3:13-4:18

As noted yesterday, Moses' commissioning is unusually long, due to his protracted resistance. A typical commissioning includes a single expression of inadequacy by the recipient, followed by divine reassurance. Moses tries four more times to evade the call of God.

What God said to them. When Moses asked, “Who am I?” God replied, in effect, “What matters is not who you are, but who I am” (3:12). That prompts Moses to ask a follow-up question.

“What is your name?” So far, Moses would have encountered the Hebrew God, Egyptian gods, and Midianite gods. With ‘I am who I am’, God affirms his uniqueness and autonomy (or ‘asceity’). He is without peer, the one true God, eternally existent and self-contained. This incomparable deity has been the patron of Israel since the days of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob (3:13-17). These attributes are essential in the coming confrontation with Egypt: Israel’s survival depends on God using his unrivaled power on behalf of his people (3:18-22).

“What if they do not listen?” To establish Moses’ bona fides, God empowers him to transform his staff into a snake, to inflict skin disease, and to foul the Nile. Why these three

particular signs? At least the cobra and the Nile were symbols of Egyptian national power and their patron deities. All three phenomena – poisonous snakes, skin disease, and foul water – also played on ancient fears. These symbols threaten divine judgment, and credential Moses (4:1-9).

“I am not a competent public speaker.” Moses' third objection minimizes his speaking ability. God's reply is clipped: he is the one who creates human abilities; he can certainly heighten Moses' skills (4:10-12).

“Please find someone else.” Having run out of his excuses, Moses still declines. God loses patience, and consents to Aaron assisting his brother (4:13-17).

In keeping with the overall theme, God's promises, and his work of redemption, continue to move forward in the face of obstacles. In this case, the obstacle is persistent resistance from his appointed leader, in the face of the overwhelming might of imperial Egypt.



What God is saying to us. Because of Moses' role and stature in redemptive history, it would require a certain vanity to draw lessons from this passage for personal ministry or calling: “Unlike Moses, we should not be fearful that people may reject us, or that we are underqualified, but should instead accept God's commission without reservation.” While such moralism may well be true, it is at best trite. At worst, it is suggestive of an inflated self-

esteem, even narcissism, to put ourselves in parallel with Moses, as though we are in his league, or even playing on the same field. The more accurate and modest parallel would be between ourselves and the Israelite masses (who do not feature in this passage).

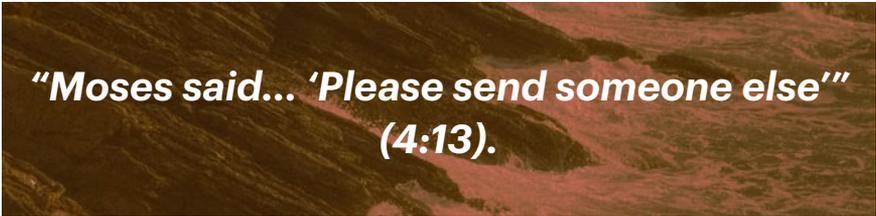
Instead, a comparison and contrast of Moses with Jesus is more appropriate. On occasion, the Gospel of John explicitly compares the two (e.g., John 1:17; 3:14; 5:45-46; 6:32; 7:19-23; 9:28-29). Elsewhere, what he says of Jesus is suggestive of an implicit comparison (an 'echo', in scholarly jargon). Jesus' self-description in John 8 supplies an example.

Like Moses, Jesus is commissioned by God as a messenger and revealer: "I do nothing on my own but speak just what the Father has taught me" (John 8:28). Like Moses on Sinai, but in a fuller sense, Jesus reports "what I have seen in the Father's presence" (John 8:38).

While a Moses-Jesus comparison is legitimate, the closer parallel is arguably between Yahweh and Jesus. For in God's self-referential, 'I am who I am' (Exodus 3:14), we find the roots of Jesus' breathtaking self-identification, 'I am' (John 8:24,58 cf. 6:32-58; 8:12; 10:9,11-14; 14:6).

So the application of this passage invites us to worship Christ for two characteristics. First, as commissioned agent, he is superior even to the great Moses. Secondly, as divine being, he is equal with God himself.

Though it involves a move from the sublime to the ignoble, while we avoid any direct comparison between the eminent Moses and ourselves, it may be defensible to relate his mission and commission to ours in a secondary, extended sense. As disciples of Christ, we all participate in an analogous calling, the 'Great Commission' (Matthew 28:18-20). Few of us, if any, will ever be called to redeem our nation from foreign oppression, or to launch a new era in redemptive history, so we neither need nor expect as dramatic a call as Moses experienced. But we all share responsibility in Christ's commission to redeem people from bondage to sin and Satan. Moses holds up a mirror to our efforts at evasion: are our excuses any more valid than those that Moses offers – and that God dismisses – in this passage?



DAY 6

EVEN GOD'S ANOINTED DARE NOT TRIFLE WITH HIM

Exodus 4:19-31

This passage is clearly transitional. Geographically, the narrative begins with God directing Moses to leave Midian for Egypt (verses 19-20). God then directs Aaron to join him mid-journey at Mount Horeb (verses 27-28). They travel together to Egypt, and meet with the elders of Israel (verses 29-31).

Thematically, the passage is also transitional, bridging from Moses' commissioning in the first part of chapter 4, to his confrontations with Pharaoh beginning in chapter 5. Moses' commission has two features: speaking on God's behalf and performing signs (4:1-17 cf. 3:13-20). God repeats the two functions here (verses 21-23). Then Moses informs Aaron of the two (verses 27-28). Finally, Aaron does both in their first meeting with the elders of Israel (verses 29-30).

The question remains, though, whether the passage has any purpose beyond moving Moses and Aaron into place to begin ministry. A close reading turns up additional significance.

What God said to them. Two literary features combine to make a surprising – even shocking – point. In verse 19, God

calls Moses to return to Egypt now that “all the people wanting his life” have died. In verse 24, on the journey from Midian to Egypt, “Yahweh wants to kill him.” Moses’ problem has gotten immeasurably worse: while he no longer needs to fear the former Egyptian authorities, he now faces danger from God.

Another parallel reinforces the point. Verses 22-23 summarize Moses’ impending ministry by focusing on the tenth plague, with inverse parallelism:

a	“Israel is <i>my firstborn son</i> ,
b	and I told you, “Let <i>my son</i> go, so he may worship me.”
b’	But you refused to let him go;
a’	so I will kill <i>your firstborn son</i> ” (verses 22-23).

The chiasm indicates that God’s judgment is retributive and just: Pharaoh oppressed God’s firstborn son; now God will execute Pharaoh’s firstborn son.

The parallelism does not stop there: after threatening the life of Pharaoh’s son, God then threatens the life of Moses because of his son. (The Hebrew grammar is ambiguous: in even closer parallel, it could instead be the life of Moses’ son that is threatened.) It is remarkable that God issues a death threat not only against his enemy, but also against his servant.

The pressing question is: Why would God want to kill Moses while he is on his way to fulfill the commission that God just

gave him? The answer can be inferred from the solution: “Zipporah took a flint knife, cut off her son’s foreskin and touched his feet with it.” (In Hebrew, ‘feet’ is a euphemism for male genitals, though it is again uncertain whether ‘his’ refers to Moses’ or the son’s ‘feet’.)

There is more here than we understand at this distance, but one point is clear. God deems Moses’ failure to circumcise his son to be a capital offense. He had warned Abraham: “Every male among you shall be circumcised... Any uncircumcised male ... will be cut off from his people” (Genesis 17:10,14). Lest God impose that sentence, the deficit must be rectified before Moses enters battle against Pharaoh. (A similar situation recurs in Joshua 5: the wilderness generation had not circumcised their sons, a lapse that God commands Joshua to rectify before they invade Canaan.)

God’s enemy and his servant face the same threat: the one, for enslaving God’s people; the other, for neglecting circumcision. Two inferences follow. One: God is not to be trifled with, whether by foe or by friend. The other: circumcision is ‘life-and-death’. This is a substantial – even startling – point in the middle of an otherwise transitional section.



What God is saying to us. This passage, among others, explains why circumcision caused a controversy that threatened to split the early Church (e.g., Acts 15; Galatians

5:1-6). We take it for granted that the rite was made redundant by salvation through faith alone. The point was not at all obvious to the early Christians, and for an obvious reason: if God considered killing Moses for failing to circumcise his half-gentile son, what might God do to the Church if they do not require circumcision for fully gentile converts?

With the battle over circumcision long settled, what does this passage say to us? We should note that in dismissing circumcision as a requirement for salvation, the New Testament never condones trifling with God. Galatians – one of the key texts dismissing the necessity of circumcision – warns that holiness remains non-negotiable: “Do not be deceived: God cannot be mocked. A man reaps what he sows. Whoever sows to please their flesh, from the flesh will reap destruction; whoever sows to please the Spirit, from the Spirit will reap eternal life” (Galatians 6:7-8).



“At a lodging place on the way, the Lord met [Moses] and was about to kill him” (4:24).

DAY 7

PHARAOH WINS ROUND ONE

Exodus 5:1-21

Moses' first encounter with Pharaoh illustrates Hebrew narrative technique. A number of characters participate, but each episode is limited to two actors at any one time.

a	5:1-5	Moses and Aaron command Pharaoh to release Israel.
b	5:6-9	Pharaoh directs overseers to work Israelite slaves harder.
c	5:10-12	The overseers work Israelite slaves harder.
c'	5:13-14	The overseers beat Israelite foremen over unmet quotas.
b'	5:15-18	Israelite foremen complain to Pharaoh about the work.
a'	5:19-21	Israelite foremen criticize Moses.

The passage consists of six episodes in chiasm (inverse parallelism): from Moses and Aaron, to Pharaoh, to the overseers, and back again.

This passage marks the first encounter between Moses and Pharaoh, between God and Pharaoh. It draws the battle lines; the point at issue is, Who's in charge?

What God said to them. A key feature in this passage is a number of double meanings, or double uses of the same Hebrew root word. The passage begins with Moses and Aaron as emissaries of God confronting Pharaoh: "This is

what the Lord, the God of Israel says:" (5:1). In the latter half of the passage, the slave masters serve as emissaries for a rival authority: "This is what Pharaoh says" (5:10). God commands, "Free the Israelite slaves!" Pharaoh commands, "Work the slaves harder!" This sets the central issue for chapters 1-15: Who will prevail, God or Pharaoh?

In response to Moses' opening gambit, Pharaoh challenges Yahweh's authority twice, in synonymous parallelism: "Who is the Lord, that I should obey him and let Israel go? // I do not 'know' the Lord and I will not let Israel go" (5:2). Over the following chapters, God sends the plagues, so that Pharaoh will 'know' who he is (7:5,17; 8:10,22; 9:14,29; 10:2; 11:7; 14:4,18).

A related issue is, "Whom will Israel serve?" Pharaoh insists that Israel 'work' for him (5:8,10,11,15,16(2x),18; cf. 1:13,14[3x]). Using a different meaning of the same word, God demands that Israel be released to 'worship' him (4:23). Before the plagues begin, Pharaoh commands, "Go 'work!'" (5:18). By the time the plagues end, with the same vocabulary and grammar, he will plead with Israel, "Go 'worship!'" (10:8,11,24; 12:31).

Another verbal and thematic repetition highlights contrasting responses to Israel's misery. The people 'cry' and God hears (2:23; 3:7,9); they 'cry' and Pharaoh dismisses them as lazy, working them work harder (5:8-9,15,17-18). Pharaoh is abusive; God, benevolent.

Despite God's authority and his benevolence, he and Moses decisively lose the first round. The passage begins with God 'confronting' his people (5:3); it ends with Israel 'confronting' Moses (5:20). It begins with God theoretically striking his people with a 'sword' (5:3), and ends with Pharaoh taking up a 'sword' against them (5:21).



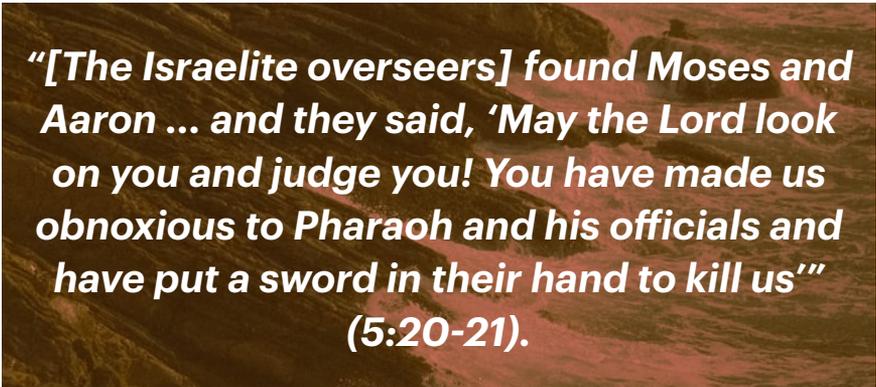
What God is saying to us. This trouble should come as no surprise, not only because no dictator ever willingly gives up power over subjects, but more so because God has recently warned Moses that Pharaoh would resist (3:19-20; 4:21). Beyond that, the pattern of progress in the face of obstacles has been the ongoing theme at least as far back as Abraham in Genesis 12. This opening salvo sets out the obstruction. By now an attentive reader expects the story line to track how God's purposes progress by overcoming this latest obstacle.

Over the next millennium and a half, the work of God will continue to suffer setback as it moves ahead incrementally: the exodus, the wilderness wanderings, the invasion of Canaan, the period of judges, the monarchy, foreign invasions of Israel and Judah, conquest and exile, the return from exile. Not a single period of Israel's history will proceed smoothly. So, too, the ministry of Jesus, and the spread of the early Church.

Consequently, this episode, and the trajectory that follows from it, remain paradigmatic today. As a matter of course,

we should expect the work of God to face both obstacle and opposition. Political empire and spiritual powers have always opposed and obstructed the mission of God. Even when he explicitly directs its strategy and oversees its implementation, his cause will face resistance, provoke antagonism, and suffer setback, before eventually succeeding.

The general principle is firmly established here and throughout Scripture. Specific application to local and individual ministries requires more nuance and some caution. Sometimes our efforts for God are prone to failure less because of external opposition, than because they are ill-conceived, poorly planned, inadequately executed, or underfunded. We must not blame these sorts of failure on opposition, or on God.



***“[The Israelite overseers] found Moses and Aaron ... and they said, ‘May the Lord look on you and judge you! You have made us obnoxious to Pharaoh and his officials and have put a sword in their hand to kill us’”
(5:20-21).***

DAY 8

A CRISIS OF CONFIDENCE

Exodus 5:22-6:27

At first glance, this passage appears to lack coherence. The genealogy in 6:14-25 is particularly incongruous, as it interrupts Moses' interactions with Pharaoh. On the other hand, the narrator links the genealogy at beginning and end to the surrounding narrative (6:13 cf. 6:26-27). So the reader's first task is to understand the thematic connection between these diverse genre.

What God said to them. When the initial confrontation with Pharaoh backfired, Moses, Aaron, and God all lost credibility. At the end of yesterday's passage, Israel called upon God to punish the would-be leaders (5:19-21). Today's passage begins with Moses accusing God of working with Pharaoh to 'bring trouble' on Israel, instead of delivering them, as he commanded Moses and Aaron to announce (5:22-23). So all three of them lost credibility in the debacle, setting the agenda for the passage.

God first affirms his own credibility by doubling down on his original promise. By his great power, Yahweh will redeem Israel from slavery in Egypt, and bring them back home to Canaan. He acts out of commitment to the covenant he made with the patriarchs, and out of compassion for them in their suffering (6:1-5 cf. 3:6-9).

God then validates Moses by authorizing his message. Five times God promises deliverance: he will bring them out, free them, redeem them, take them as his own people, and again, bring them out. Twice more he promises them Canaan as a homeland. He bookends these promises by swearing in his own name: "I am the Lord" (6:6-8 cf. 3:16-18).

This reassurance is not enough to instill confidence among the Israelites. That, in turn, causes Moses to lose confidence when God sends him back to Pharaoh (6:9-12 cf. 4:10-12).

Since Aaron does not participate in the encounter with God, some other form of validation is necessary for him. This is the function of the genealogy. An introduction and conclusion explicitly link it to the exodus narrative: "It was this Aaron and Moses to whom the Lord said, 'Bring the Israelites out of Egypt'" (6:26 cf. 6:13,27). The genealogy begins with the patriarchs in order, until reaching the forefather of Moses and Aaron: Reuben, Simeon, and finally, Levi (6:14-16). A second generation passes (6:17-19). The third generation includes Amram, father of Moses and Aaron (6:20-22). Then Moses drops from view, and the genealogy continues with Aaron's son Eleazar, and his grandson Phinehas (6:23-25). As the first three high priests, these figures feature prominently in coming events: Aaron (Exodus and Leviticus), Eleazar (Numbers), and Phinehas (Joshua).

The message of this passage is that the initial setback does not invalidate the mission or its leaders. God reaffirms his

commitment to the covenant, and his compassion for his people. He validates Moses' message of deliverance and land. He authorizes Aaron and his successors to serve until Israel is settled in Canaan.



What God is saying to us. At one level, Moses had reason to suppose that the exodus would proceed smoothly: his call was dramatic, his role was designated by God, he could perform miracles, and he partnered with a skilled speaker. On the other hand, God had repeatedly warned him that Pharaoh would resist until compelled by plagues (3:19-20 cf. 4:21). Despite this warning, Moses is surprised when Pharaoh resists and Israel reacts.

The reader is surprised by Moses' surprise. After all, ever since God first appeared to Abraham in Genesis 12, the constant drumbeat has been: the mission of God proceeds incrementally in the face of obstacles. Yet, our own perfect vision works only in hindsight. When the mission of the Church faces setback today – for example, when yet another totalitarian empire launches a pogrom – we, like Israel, quickly become disheartened, and our leaders, like Moses, lose hope.

When it comes to applying this text to the details of strategy and role, however, we must proceed carefully. We cannot use this passage to rationalize every setback. Sometimes we fail not because of the plan and purpose of God, but because we launch into an ill-conceived venture,

adopt a flawed strategy, or refuse to adapt to a changing context.

Even then, this passage at least alerts us not to be quick with recriminations when we hit a rough patch in ministry. Obstacles and struggles do not necessarily mean that our mission is wrong, or that our leaders have failed. We learn from the exodus – as from the ministry of Jesus, and the history of the Church – that opposition and difficulty may be designed by God to create the conditions that enable him to reveal his power and manifest his glory.



“It was this Aaron and Moses to whom the Lord said, ‘Bring the Israelites out of Egypt by their divisions’” (6:26).

DAY 9

YAHWEH REIGNS OVER ALL THE EARTH

Exodus 6:28-10:29

Exodus develops in much the same way as a modern three-act play. Act 1 introduces the main characters (Moses and Pharaoh), the dramatic premise (Israel's enslavement in Egypt), and an inciting incident (Moses' initial encounter with Pharaoh) (1:1-6:27). Now, Act 2 presents the main event.

What God said to them. This passage begins with a recap of the past and an overview of what is to come. It includes the third version of Moses' call. The initial call is the most comprehensive, with a particular focus on Moses' role as surrogate for God (3:7-22). In the aftermath of Moses' failed intervention with Pharaoh, the second report stresses – eight times in three verses – the certainty that God will deliver Israel (6:6-12). This third version offers a rationale for the plagues: whether it is Moses or Aaron who speaks, Pharaoh will not respond either to word or to wonder, until God inflicts severe judgment (6:28-7:7).

In addition to securing Israel's release and punishing Egypt, the plagues have a deeper purpose. When Moses invokes God to command the release of the slaves, Pharaoh is dismissive:

- “Who is Yahweh, / that I should obey him and let Israel go?
- I do not ‘know’ Yahweh / and I will not let Israel go” (5:2).

The plagues will teach Pharaoh just who this God is: “The Egyptians will ‘know’ that I am Yahweh when I stretch out my hand against Egypt” (7:5). This purpose forms a recurring refrain to the plagues:

- “By this you will ‘know’ that I am Yahweh” (7:17);
- “so that you may ‘know’ there is no one like Yahweh our God” (8:10);
- “so that you will ‘know’ that I, Yahweh, am in this land” (8:22);
- “so you may ‘know’ that there is no one like me in all the earth” (9:14);
- “so you may ‘know’ that the earth is Yahweh’s” (9:29).

The plagues demonstrate that Yahweh is not some minor patron deity over a ragtag band of slaves; he is the God of heaven and earth, creator of the world and sovereign over it.

Given that Egypt’s economy and culture are predominately agrarian, God demonstrates his power through a series of nature miracles on Egyptian territory. Not all of the plagues are known to connect to a specific Egyptian deity, but several do. The cobra is a symbol of Egyptian political and spiritual power, featured on the headdress of the Pharaoh,

so Aaron's staff becomes a serpent and swallows up the Egyptian staff-serpents (7:8-13). Pharaoh ordered the drowning of Israelite children in the Nile, so the first plague turns the Nile, deified as the god Hapi, red and noxious (7:14-24). Pharaoh decreed the eradication of Israelite babies, so the second plague, the invasion of frogs, takes aim at Heqt, the Egyptian goddess of childbirth, pictured with the head of a frog (8:1-15).

The fifth plague, against livestock, is likely a polemic against Hathor, goddess of women and sky, portrayed as a cow (9:1-7). The thunderstorms of the seventh plague allude to Seth, Egyptian god of storms (9:13-35). The ninth plague, darkness, takes aim at Re, the sun god (10:21-29). The tenth, the death of the firstborn, challenges Osiris, judge of the dead (12:29-30).¹

Through these plagues, God establishes his credentials. He – not the myriad Egyptian gods or the demigod Pharaoh – is Lord over creation and nations. Pharaoh will come to know this.



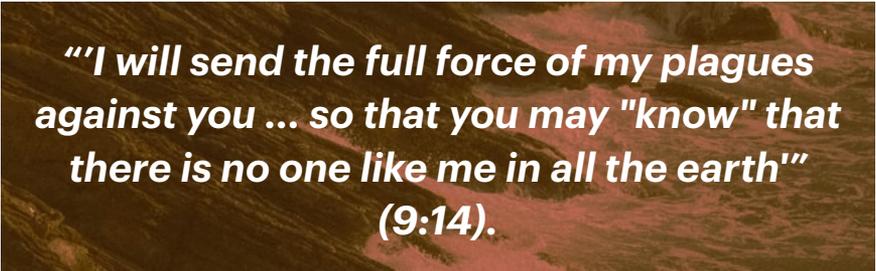
What God is saying to us. With Exodus, the plagues become stock images for the judgment of God against empires that oppress his people. Most conspicuously,

¹ Ziyo Zevit, "Three Ways to Look at the Ten Plagues," <http://www.biblicalarchaeology.org/daily/biblical-topics/exodus/exodus-in-the-bible-and-the-egyptian-plagues/> (accessed 3/13/14).

several of the plagues reappear in the book of Revelation (specifically, hail, blood, locusts, boils, darkness, and frogs) (Revelation 8-16). At one level, they target the Roman empire of the first-century. At a deeper level, they symbolize eschatological retribution against all empires that afflict the Church throughout time.

The specific application of Exodus 6b-10 – that the plagues would disclose God to the current emperor – is largely absent, however. The function of the plague motif throughout Scripture, and in Revelation particularly, is to motivate God’s people to persevere, with the reassurance that God tracks the suffering of his people and punishes their persecutors.

So today, the message of the plagues serves less as a paradigm for some contemporary Moses wannabe to call down the judgment of God against oppressive powers, than as a motivation to the suffering Church that God rules over all nations and their rulers, and will one day rescue his people and punish their oppressors.



***“I will send the full force of my plagues against you ... so that you may "know" that there is no one like me in all the earth”
(9:14).***

DAY 10

HARDENED HEART

Exodus 7:8-10:29

Before moving on to the tenth and culminating plague, we briefly consider a recurring motif within these narratives: God hardening Pharaoh's heart, lest he acquiesce under pressure from the plagues and permit Israel to emigrate.

Read within an autocratic culture, the notion that God controls Pharaoh is less a problem, and more a positive. In that context, the issue is, Who is stronger: Pharaoh, who oppresses Israel, or the God of Israel, who defends them? Hardening proclaims that God has authority not only over his worshippers but even over their enemies, not only over those who worship him, but even over those who reject him.

For a professedly egalitarian culture, however, the motif of hardening raises an ethical conundrum: Is it just for God to cause Pharaoh's resistance, and then punish him for it?

What God said to them. Hardening appears roughly twenty times, in three forms: (1) descriptive ("Pharaoh's heart was hard," 7:13,14,22; 8:19; 9:7,35); (2) reflexive ("Pharaoh hardened his heart," 8:15,32; 9:34); and, (3) causative ("God hardened Pharaoh's heart," 4:21; 7:3; 9:12; 10:1,20,27; 11:10; 14:4,8,17). The variation raises the question, Which came first: Pharaoh's hard heart or God's hardening? That is, does

primary responsibility for the hardening rest with Pharaoh or with God?

As the process unfolds, the narrator largely ascribes initiative to Pharaoh. His heart is already hard (7:13,14,22; 8:19), and he further hardens it (8:15,32), mostly before the narrator ever attributes the hardening to God (9:12; 10:1,20,27; 11:10; 14:4,8,17). Once God steps in, Pharaoh steps back: only once does he ever harden his own heart again (9:34). If this modest sample size is sufficient, it could conceivably lessen the tension: Pharaoh would bear primary responsibility for his own condition, with divine hardening as a judicial response, giving him what he prefers.

On the other hand, prior to the execution of the process, God twice claims overall credit. In his first instructions to Moses, God commands, “Perform before Pharaoh all the wonders I have given you the power to do. But I will harden his heart so that he will not let the people go” (4:21). Later, just as the process kicks off, God again takes credit: “I will harden Pharaoh’s heart, and though I multiply my signs and wonders in Egypt, he will not listen to you.” (7:3-4).

Does this mean that God causes Pharaoh’s resistance, and then punishes him for it? Two factors suggest not.

The first is the context of human slavery. Pharaoh – like any other slave master – is averse to releasing exploited labor. What he may lack is sufficient determination to persist in the face of plagues. God provides this strength.

The second factor is the basic meaning and effect of hardening. God does not cause Pharaoh to reject Moses. He does not make Pharaoh act against his own will. He simply stiffens Pharaoh's resolve so that he has the fortitude to stand firm as the plagues increase in number and severity.

The concept of hardening explains how any human ruler is able to resist the command of almighty God. By mere word, God made the heavens and the earth. By his word, he raises nations to preeminence, and lowers them to ignominy. How can a mere mortal – even the tyrant of the world's leading superpower – resist the omnipotent God? Ironically, only as God strengthens his resolve. Even God's enemies depend on him for the perseverance to resist him. The two factors are coordinate: God strengthens Pharaoh to persist in his preferred course of action.

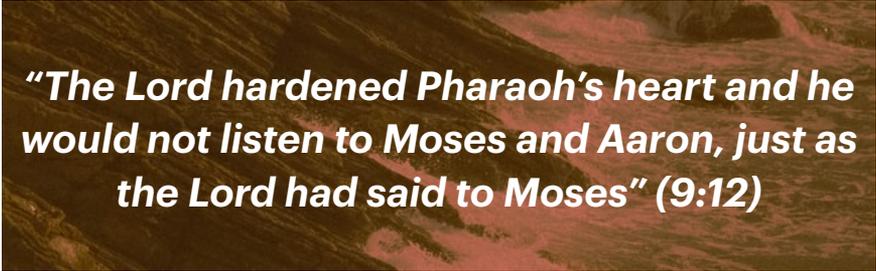


What God is saying to us. Arguing from analogy, the apostle Paul draws out a theological principle from this historical incident. The details are best left for the daily reading on Romans 9, because both the passage and the doctrine of election are complex. For the moment, two points suffice.

First, referencing the precedents of Moses versus Pharaoh (as well as Jacob versus Esau), Paul concludes: "God has mercy on whom he wants to have mercy, and he hardens whom he wants to harden" (Romans 9:17). Just as he sovereignly decided to make covenant with Jacob, not Esau,

and with Israel, not Egypt, so God chooses to show saving mercies toward some, and to empower others in their resistance.

At the same time, coordinate causation again comes into play. Continuing his exposition, Paul identifies a second factor in salvation or condemnation: “Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved... But not all the Israelites accepted the good news” (Romans 10:13,16). Just as in the case of Pharaoh’s historical fate, so with eternal salvation, outcomes depend on coordinate influence: divine election and human decision.



“The Lord hardened Pharaoh’s heart and he would not listen to Moses and Aaron, just as the Lord had said to Moses” (9:12)

DAY 11

THE PLAGUE AND THE PASSING-OVER

Exodus 11:1-13:16

This passage is rather long for a daily reading, but it forms a single unit, covering one event. The event has four aspects: a plague on Egyptian firstborn sons and cattle; a sacrifice to ensure that the plague bypasses the Israelites; the departure of Israel from Egypt; and, guidelines for future commemoration. The narrative reports the event in two parts: the first anticipates the event (A,B,C); the second records it unfolding in reverse order (C',B',A'), forming a chiasm. Two addendums fill in details.

A	11:1-10	Plague on Egyptian firstborn – with exodus – announced
B	12:1-13	Passover sacrifice instructions
C	12:14-17	Festival of Unleavened Bread instructions
C'	12:18-20	Festival of Unleavened Bread instructions repeated
B'	12:21-28	Passover sacrifice implementation
A'	12:29-42	Plague on Egyptian firstborn – with exodus – occurs
–	12:43-51	Addendum restricting participation in the festival
–	13:1-16	Addendum on commemoration in Canaan

Notably, while the event has four aspects, the chart differentiates only three, because the plague on the

Egyptian firstborn combines with the exodus of Israel, both in announcement and in execution.

The space allotted this event, the reconfiguration of the annual calendar to begin with it (12:2), and the requirement that the occasion be celebrated annually, in perpetuity, by the entire community (12:3,47), all mark the plague-Passover-exodus complex as a defining moment for Israel.

What God said to them. In view of the chiasmic structure, we consider the pairs together: plague-exodus, sacrifice, commemoration.

The first and sixth segments first anticipate and then report the plague on the firstborn sons and animals of Egypt, leading to the exodus of Israel (11:1-10; 12:29-42). Both passages focus on justification for the killings. First, this plague comes only after – and because – Pharaoh stubbornly refuses to heed nine previous plagues (11:1; 12:31-33). Secondly, the severity of the plague is retributive. A previous Pharaoh ordered the killing of Israelite sons; now it is Egyptian sons who die (11:4-5; 12:29 cf. 1:15-22). Abuse caused Israel to 'cry out' to God; now the plague causes Egypt to 'cry out' (11:6; 12:30 cf. 2:23; 3:7,9; 5:8). Egypt exploited Israel economically; now Israel plunders Egypt (11:2-3; 12:35-36).

The second and fifth sections provide Israel a means of escape from the plague. They are to sacrifice a firstborn lamb or goat, and anoint the doorframes of their homes with its blood. They then eat the roasted lamb in its entirety.

When the avenging angel passes through the country to kill the Egyptian firstborn, he will pass over all homes marked with blood (12:113). Moses passes on these instructions for observance in perpetuity (12:21-28).

The third and fourth units prescribe the accompanying festival of Unleavened Bread (12:14-16,17-20). The two units repeat virtually the same points, and in the same order: all Israel is to commemorate the exodus, perpetually, with a seven-day sacred festival featuring unleavened bread.

Two addendums add details. The former restricts participation to circumcised Israelites and permanent members of their households (12:43-51). The latter commands continued commemoration of the exodus once Israel takes up residence in Canaan (13:1-16). It also stipulates an additional requirement: to celebrate God's rescue of the firstborn, all firstborn children and animals belong to the Lord, and are to be redeemed (details follow later in Exodus, in Numbers, and in Deuteronomy).



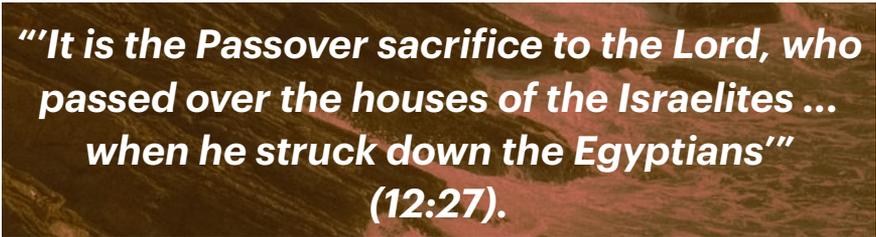
What God is saying to us. The New Testament explicitly applies two aspects of this event: the Passover sacrifice, and the Festival of Unleavened Bread.

The death of the lamb to redeem Israel from slavery in Egypt anticipates the death of Jesus to redeem people from slavery to sin: "Christ, our Passover lamb, has been sacrificed" (1 Corinthians 5:7). Correspondingly, Jesus is

crucified on the day that the Passover lamb is slain (Mark 14:12).

The New Testament also appeals to the Festival of Unleavened Bread as a metaphor for Christian living. To a church that is tolerant of flagrant sin within their midst, the apostle Paul writes: "A little yeast leavens the whole batch of dough... Get rid of the old yeast, so that you may be a new unleavened batch" (1 Corinthians 5:6,8). Just as Israel commemorated its deliverance from Egypt by abstaining from yeast, so the Church is to commemorate our deliverance from sin by removing unrepentant, flagrant sinners from our midst.

The defining moment of Israel prefigures the defining moment of the Church. The death of the lamb of God delivers us from bondage to sin. We commemorate that deliverance by abstaining from sin, both individually and corporately. The celebration of Holy Communion proclaims these truths: the death of the Passover lamb for our redemption, and our commitment to individual and corporate holiness.



***“It is the Passover sacrifice to the Lord, who passed over the houses of the Israelites ... when he struck down the Egyptians”
(12:27).***

DAY 12

THE DELIVERANCE OF ISRAEL

Exodus 13:17-14:31

No sooner has Israel fled Egypt than Pharaoh regrets his decision to let them go, and Israel regrets their decision to leave. Neither has accounted for the God who fights for Israel.

What God said to them. The episode begins with God choosing a circuitous path for Israel through uninhabited wilderness, lest the risk of war scare them into returning to Egypt. The episode ends with Israel trusting both God and Moses. What happened in between to boost their confidence?

Israel's initial anxiety is ironic. God has just delivered them from the Egyptian empire through a series of powerful miracles (chapters 7-13a). Moreover, they carry with them the bones of Joseph, who, centuries earlier, foresaw a day when God would bring them back to Canaan (cf. Genesis 50:25). Beyond that, they have the constant presence of God, visible in a luminous cloud that guides the way by day and night (13:17-22).

God devises a strategy to boost their confidence in him, while also demonstrating his power to the Egyptians. He directs Israel to encamp in an indefensible location, with the sea in front of them, and the Egyptian army behind (14:1-4).

Pharaoh takes the bait. Regretting the loss of slave labor, and emboldened by God, he gathers his formidable forces, including hundreds of chariots, and sets off in pursuit of Israel (14:5-9).

As the Egyptian army advances, Israelite bravado turns to panic. They cry out to God, and turn on Moses: “What have you done to us?! Better to live as slaves in Egypt, than to die in the desert!” (14:10-12).

Moses puts on a brave public face: “The Lord will fight for you!”, but privately, he too cries out. God directs him to lift his hand and part the sea, so that Israel can ‘go through’ the water. For his part, God will strengthen Egyptian resolve so that they ‘go into’ the water. Then he will manifest his power and increase his prestige by defeating the Egyptian forces (14:13-18).

In language reminiscent of the original creation narrative, God separates darkness and light, as on the first day, giving Israel time and space to maneuver (14:19-20). He divides sea and dry land, as on the third day, and Israel walks through (14:21-22). When Egypt pursues, they struggle and conclude that, “The Lord is fighting for them against [us]” (14:23-25). At daybreak, Moses again stretches out his hand and the waters return, drowning the Egyptian forces (14:26-28).

The conclusion captures the effect of God’s intervention: “When the Israelites saw the mighty hand of the Lord displayed against the Egyptians, the people ... put their trust in him and in Moses his servant” (14:29-31).



What God is saying to us. The application of the exodus today is guided by its application throughout the rest of Scripture.

The crossing of the sea emboldens the next generation, as they cross the Jordan River in order to invade Canaan, with its myriad enemies (Joshua 3-4). Roughly a millennium later, Israel returns to foreign exile – in Babylon this time – until the new emperor Cyrus authorizes them to go back to their homeland. The prophets encourage migration by portraying it as a second exodus, a second ‘redemption’ from foreign slavery (e.g., Isaiah 43:14-17; Micah 6:4; Zechariah 10:8-12 cf. Exodus 6:6; Deuteronomy 7:8; 2 Samuel 7:23; 1 Chronicles 17:21; Psalm 78:42-52). That is to say, later application consistently finds a parallel to Exodus in the geopolitical events of their own time, not in the daily affairs of their individual lives.

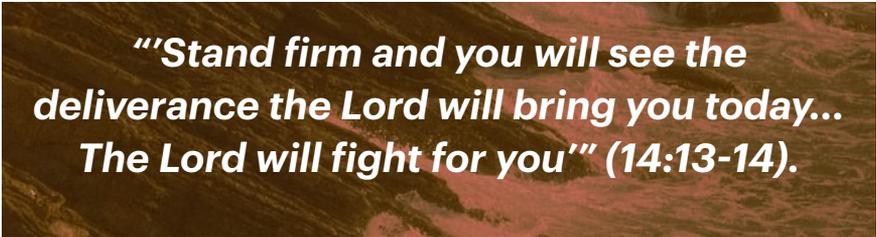
The New Testament continues and expands the application of the exodus as ‘redemption’. With Israel occupied by the infidel Roman army, Luke brackets his gospel with the hope that Jesus will fulfill Isaiah’s prediction that God will ‘redeem’ Israel (Luke 1:68-75; 2:38; 21:20-28; 24:21). At his final appearance, Jesus clarifies that the redemption he brings is not geopolitical restoration for national Israel, but forgiveness of sin for all peoples (Luke 24:21,44-47).

The apostle Paul, too, consistently speaks of ‘redemption’ in this expanded sense: “All are justified freely by his grace

through the 'redemption' that came by Christ Jesus... as a sacrifice of atonement, through the shedding of his blood" (Romans 3:23-25 cf. Galatians 3:13-14; Ephesians 1:7; Colossians 1:14).

Nonetheless, geopolitical liberation does not entirely fall from view. As the growing Church suffers under persecution by a totalitarian Roman empire, God again 'redeems' his people, this time exalting them to eternal glory (Revelation 14:15).

As God redeemed Israel from slavery in Egypt through the sacrifice of the Passover lamb, so Jesus, by his death, redeems those who come to him, whether their oppressor be sin or despot.



“Stand firm and you will see the deliverance the Lord will bring you today... The Lord will fight for you” (14:13-14).

DAY 13

A PAEAN TO THE WARRIOR-KING

Exodus 15:1-21

This passage brings the first section of Exodus – chapters 1-15 – to a close. The climax came in the crossing of the sea, and the destruction of the Egyptian army (chapters 13b-14). Now, in a pattern taken over from military practice, grateful subjects celebrate their victorious warrior-king.

What God said to them. Framing and style mark the limits of this passage. In verse 1, Moses leads the Israelites in worship: “I will sing to the Lord, for he is highly exalted. Both horse and driver he has hurled into the sea.” In verse 21, Miriam leads the women: “Sing to the Lord, for he is highly exalted. Both horse and driver he has hurled into the sea.” Within this frame, the song divides into two parts: verses 2-12 laud God for his victory over Egypt; verses 13-18 anticipate God leading the conquest of Canaan.

Genre confirms the limits of the passage. Apart from narrative settings in verse 1a and verses 19-20, the remainder of the passage is explicitly identified as a song, and uses the elevated language and imagery characteristic of that genre. In ancient times, as still today, after a war, the victorious general would typically lead the army into the capital city to the acclaim of adoring crowds lined along the

parade route. The Old Testament provides several examples of hymns to God in response to various acts of divine deliverance (for example, Numbers 21:17-18; Deuteronomy 32:1-47; Judges 4-5; 1 Samuel 18:6-7; 2 Samuel 22; Isaiah 42:10-17).

The hymn celebrates God as 'divine warrior' fighting for Israel. Verses 2-12 credit him for the destruction of the Egyptian army. Nearly every verse ascribes some military act to him: 'my strength and defense', 'warrior', he 'hurled [the Egyptian army] into the sea', and 'drowned' the Egyptian officers. His 'right hand' shattered the enemy. Metaphorically, in the cosmic language of creation, his breath is the wind that blew a path for Israel through the sea, and that returned the waters to drown the enemy combatants.

Verses 13-18 look ahead to the invasion of Canaan. God will lead the conquest. The current inhabitants – Philistines, Edomites, Moabites, Canaanites – will tremble as Israel approaches. He will settle his people on his holy mountain (whether this refers to Mount Sinai, Canaan, or Mount Zion is unclear).

Two caveats moderate the exuberance of this victory song. For one, subsequent biblical narratives – not only in Exodus, but also partly in Joshua, and especially in Judges – indicate that the invasion will be hard-fought and lengthy. This is not problematic: a degree of hyperbole is characteristic of victory songs. The medium aims for celebration; not for close analysis.

For the other, while it is not fully apparent in English translation, the underlying Hebrew allots Moses a public role, while crediting God alone for the victory over Egypt. In the report of the actual battle, Moses raises his 'hand' to divide the waters for Israel (verses 16,21); and again, to return the waters so that the Egyptian army drowns (verses 26,27). Yet, at both its beginning and its end, the song attributes the victory not to the hand of Moses, but to the 'right hand' of God defeating the 'hand' of Egypt (verse 6 cf. verse 9; verse 30 cf. verse 31). God grants Moses a visible role in order to validate his authority, yet the effective role is his own, and thus, the paean honors him.



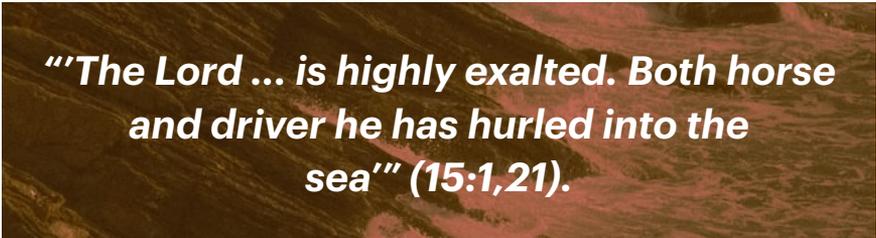
What God is saying to us. Within the New Testament, paeans to God as warrior-king occur most often in the book of Revelation. Two are particularly noteworthy.

In Revelation 5, the angel of the Lord announces: "See, the Lion of the tribe of Judah, the Root of David, has triumphed." The elder John looks up to see a lamb, looking "as if it had been slain" (5:5-6). In the context of political oppression under the idolatrous Roman empire, Jesus serves as a model for Christians who likewise triumph over Satan by dying: "They triumphed over [Satan] by the blood of the Lamb and by the word of their testimony; they did not love their lives so much as to shrink from death" (12:11).

Then across the final chapters of the book God conquers the forces that wage war against his people: "Woe to you ...

mighty city of Babylon! In one hour your doom has come!” (18:1,10). Victory is followed by a paean of praise to the conquering warrior-king: “Hallelujah! For our Lord God Almighty reigns. Let us rejoice and be glad and give him glory!” (19:6-7).

This is the promise for all who live and die with Christ: triumph now through suffering, with ultimate victory at the end of time.



“The Lord ... is highly exalted. Both horse and driver he has hurled into the sea” (15:1,21).

DAY 14

DEPRIVATION AS A TEST

Exodus 15:22-17:7

The next few chapters bridge between the escape out of Egypt (chapters 1-15a) and the giving of the Law at Sinai (chapters 19-24). Three sections reflect on challenges that beset Israel in aftermath of leaving Egypt: deprivation in the wilderness (chapters 15b-17a), conflict with other peoples (chapter 17b), and the regulation of community life (chapter 18).

What God said to them. Today's passage reflects the privations of life in the wilderness. Three episodes report Israelite response to the lack of basic necessities. The episodes cohere around the theme of 'testing'. In the first two, God 'tests' Israel (15:25; 16:4); by the third, their recurrent complaining 'tests' God (17:2,7).

Within three days of leaving Egypt: they have no potable water. In response, they grumble against Moses. He cries out to the Lord, who provides a remedy. The narrator characterizes the incident as a 'test': "'If you pay attention to [my] commands and keep all [my] decrees, I will not bring on you any of the diseases I brought on the Egyptians'" (15:22-27). Those commands and decrees will soon be revealed at Sinai (chapters 19-24).

A second crisis hits just over a month later: they have no food. Israel reacts vehemently: seven times the narrator mentions their grumbling. God then provides both quail and manna. He designs a collection process of six days on, one day off: “In this way I will ‘test’ them and see whether they will follow my instructions.” Some hoard manna overnight, or try to gather manna on the Sabbath. Exasperated, God exclaims, “How long will you refuse to keep my commands and my instructions?” (16:1-36). This test, too, anticipates the revelation of the Law’s commands at Sinai.

The third episode recalls the first: again they have no water. Their complaints rise another decibel, not only grumbling against Moses, but also quarreling with him, even threatening to stone him. Now it is not the Lord who tests them, but they who ‘test’ the Lord, provocatively asking: “Is the Lord among us or not?” At God’s direction, Moses takes his staff and strikes a rock to bring forth water. Moses memorializes their deplorable behavior in the names for the location: Massah (‘testing’) and Meribah (‘quarreling’) (17:1-7). The event burned deeply in the biblical record, where ‘Massah’ and ‘Meribah’ embody the worst tendencies of Israel (e.g., Numbers 20, Deuteronomy 33, Psalms 81, 95, 106).

Clearly water and food are not their greatest deficits. After passing through the sea, they had “put their trust in [the Lord] and in Moses” (14:31). That confidence does not survive the first challenges.



What God is saying to us. Among several New Testament texts that develop the themes of this passage, John 6 is the most extensive. In 6:1-15, Jesus is on a mountainside, around the time of Passover, when a great multitude approaches. Taking five barley rolls and two sardine-sized fish, he feeds 5,000. Jesus is the second Moses, feeding multitudes in the wilderness. In a brief interlude that follows, Jesus walks on water in the presence of his disciples: he is greater than Moses, walking not through the sea, but upon it.

John follows up the feeding miracle with a sermon based on the manna of Exodus 16. Jewish interlocutors ask him for a sign: “[Moses] gave them bread from heaven to eat.” Jesus revises the quote:

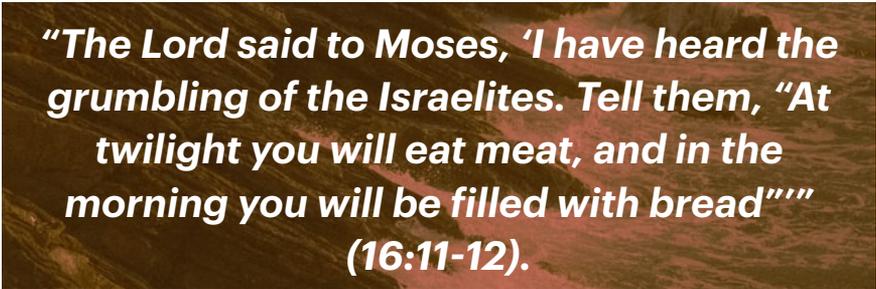
*“It was not Moses / who gave you / the bread from
heaven, //
but it is my Father / who gives you / the true bread from
heaven.”*

Asked for this life-giving bread, Jesus replies:

*“I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never
go hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be
thirsty... Your ancestors ate the manna in the wilderness,
yet they died... I am the living bread that came down
from heaven. Whoever eats this bread will live forever.”*

Jesus is more than a second and greater Moses who miraculously feeds a multitude: he is the second and greater manna, sent from heaven, to give eternal life. In another affinity with Exodus, this claim provokes 'grumbling' from the crowd, and even from some would-be followers (John 6:30-65).

John 6, like the original exodus, has an additional, concrete application. In the aftermath of the great deliverance from Egypt, Israel's grumbling in the wilderness is astoundingly faithless and petty. Similarly, in the aftermath of Jesus' sacrifice to secure us eternal life, to grumble in crisis, rather than trusting him to provide whatever else we need, would be even more faithless and petty.



***“The Lord said to Moses, ‘I have heard the grumbling of the Israelites. Tell them, “At twilight you will eat meat, and in the morning you will be filled with bread”””
(16:11-12).***

DAY 15

GOD FIGHTS ALONGSIDE ISRAEL

Exodus 17:8-16

Today's passage continues the transitional section, loosely but explicitly related in theme, bridging between the larger narratives of slavery in Egypt (chapters 1-15a) and the Law-giving at Sinai (chapters 19-24). This is the fourth of six episodes. The first three described divine deliverance from thirst and hunger, yet the series ends with insolence: "Is the Lord among us or not?" This fourth incident answers with a new sort of deliverance: rescue from military attack. As in the preceding episode, Moses' staff plays a key role. Moreover, just as the previous section anticipated the giving of the Law at Sinai, this section provides a foretaste of the invasion of Canaan.

What God said to them. God again engages in battle, punishing the Amalekites for opposing Israel. Though in this instance, his role entails fighting alongside Israel, rather than in their stead.

The episode is compact. Joshua leads the battle, appearing for the first time, without any introduction. The Amalekites attack. Moses directs Joshua to select some men, and lead them into battle. Moses will participate by climbing the top of a nearby hill, with the staff of God in his hands (17:8-9).

This is the staff through which God has already worked notable miracles: fouling the Nile, calling forth plagues of frogs, gnats, hail, and locusts, dividing the Red Sea, and bringing water out of a rock. So long as Moses holds his staff aloft, Israel prevails. When his arms tire, and he lowers the staff, the Amalekites gain advantage. So Aaron and an associate support his arms until Joshua and his men secure victory (17:10-13).

Moses celebrates in common biblical and Near-Eastern manner: by building a commemorative altar, and worshipping the God who secured the victory (17:14-16).

The incident is recorded for posterity, and because Joshua will soon be called upon to lead a great many other battles during the invasion of Canaan. This first combat serves as a precedent, inspiring courage for the war ahead. As for the Amalekites, God will eventually wipe them out, though conflict with them will persist for generations, through the reigns of Saul and David (1 Samuel 15,30).

The methodology of this battle receives disproportionate attention in contemporary scholarship. Moses raising his staff over his head is decisive in the battle. Is this indicative of a 'magical' mindset? The question reflects more the rationalism of our age than spiritism on Moses' part. Symbolic gesture and sacramental ritual are common features of most religions (not to mention, contemporary sports!). The use of gesture and ritual is not inherently magical or spiritistic.

More to the actual point of the incident, this passage provides a significant adjustment to the concept and practice of holy war. Previously, with the sea in front of them, and the Egyptian army behind, Moses counseled Israel: “The Lord will fight for you; you need only to be still” (Exodus 14:13-14). The present incident anticipates that in the invasion of Canaan, leadership will shift from Moses to Joshua. God’s role in war will also shift. As here, he will fight alongside Israel, rather than in their stead. They must take up arms in the battle.



What God is saying to us. The New Testament directs us away from one possible application of this passage, and toward another. What we must resist is the tendency to replace Israel with our own country, as though our nation is now the people of God, so that he takes our side in any war. (Notably, government propaganda on each side promoted this delusion during the American Civil War, and during the First World War.) The Church must beware of being co-opted by nationalism or tribalism. God does not fight for our nation against other countries.

Instead of calling us to war against nations or ethnicities, Jesus calls us to reach all peoples with the gospel (Matthew 28:18-20). There remains a place for holy war, but no longer between nations or ethnic groups. When Jesus goes to war now, it is against dark powers that oppose his purposes and his people.

In the aftermath of the crucifixion, God raised Christ above all powers, angelic and demonic (Ephesians 1:18-23). Together with Christ, he also raised us from among those dead in sin and under the dominion of Satan (Ephesians 2:1-6). He now calls us to join the battle, by standing our ground against those dark powers that seek to harm his work and his people (Ephesians 6:10-17). Ultimately, he will turn his sword against all forces which oppose his Church, whether it be spiritual corruption from within (Revelation 2), or political oppression from without (Revelation 19). This is the form – the only form – that holy war takes today.



“Moses built an altar and called it *The Lord is my Banner*” (17:15).

DAY 16

SALVATION MANAGEMENT

Exodus 18

This chapter contains the last two (of six) episodes bridging from Egypt to Sinai, from exodus to Law-giving. As with the first three episodes, the narrator likely compresses chronology, connecting the two incidents due to common topic and theme.

At least two details favor a compressed chronology. Verse 5 situates these episodes in proximity to Mount Sinai, though 19:1 suggests that it is another week or two before they reach there (cf. 16:1). Additionally, in verses 24-26, Moses appoints leaders to adjudicate low-level disputes, whereas Numbers and Deuteronomy date a similar initiative after the departure from Sinai (Numbers 11:16-17; Deuteronomy 1:9-18).

Topical organization draws attention to the thematic links between the two episodes, and their connections with the previous and subsequent passages.

What God said to them. Now that the worst of the crisis has passed, Jethro escorts his daughter and grandchildren back to Moses (verses 1-6). The narrator passes over the sentimental reunion: the report serves only to bring Jethro onto the scene.

Thirteen times in Exodus, Jethro is identified as Moses' father-in-law; this is one of only two times that he is identified as a 'priest of Midian' (cf. 3:1). Both aspects of this latter identity are significant here. As a Midianite, he is a foil to the Amalekites, who attacked Israel in yesterday's reading. The juxtaposition reminds the reader of the third covenant promise to Abraham, that God would curse those nations which curse Israel, and bless those which bless them (Genesis 12:3). As a priest, he is an exemplar for those who worship other gods. He hears the story of Israel's escape from Egypt: the paragraph references the exodus five times, and mentions little else besides. In response, this foreign priest offers sacrifice to Yahweh and exalts him: "'Now I know that [Yahweh] is greater than all other gods'" (verses 1-12).

The second episode shifts from the theological to the pragmatic. Moses has been filling his days adjudicating civil disputes, large and small, for the entire populace. He explains why: "'Whenever they have a dispute, it is brought to me, and I decide between the parties and inform them of 'God's decrees and instructions'.'" Jethro uses the same language to recommend a shift in focus, advocating that Moses delegate low-level judicial cases to others. Instead, he should concentrate on teaching the people '[God's] decrees and instructions', as they apply not to court cases, but to "the way they are to live and how they are to behave" (18:13-27). This recommendation prepares for the next chapter, when Moses ascends Mount Sinai to obtain the Law of God.

The conjoining of these episodes suggests two lessons. For one, their relationship is symbiotic: Moses reveals God to Jethro; Jethro teaches administration to Moses. The latter should not be disparaged, because Jethro's recommendation empowers the teaching of God's decrees and instructions. Even though Moses has direct revelation from God, he also benefits by learning management from Jethro.

The other lesson from the juxtaposition is this: in the former episode, Jethro exalts the saving work of God; in the latter, he exhorts Moses to teach Israel how to live. These are the two dimensions of the covenant: God saves, and calls his people to reciprocate with obedience.



What God is saying to us. Since this reading contains two episodes making different (but related) points, application moves in two directions.

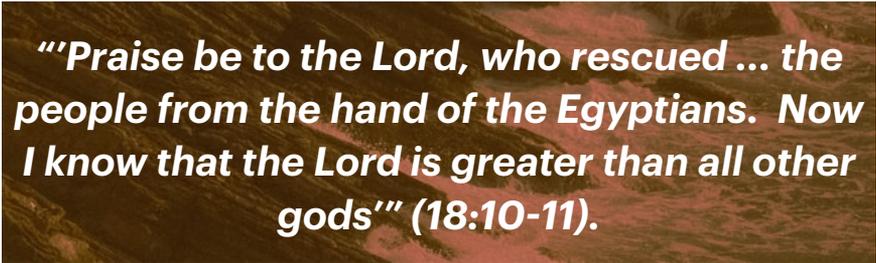
Jethro foreshadows the gentile response to the gospel. The deliverance that comes in Jesus surpasses that which came through Moses. Like Jethro, the nations learn who God is from hearing what he has done to save his people. In this respect, Jethro is our forerunner.

Jethro also demonstrates the value of strategic management and pragmatic implementation. The work of God can be advanced by skillful administration, or slowed by well-intentioned incompetence. The importance and

urgency of the work compel us to couple sound theology with astute practice.

Additionally, the second episode anticipates the revelation of God's decrees and instructions on Mount Sinai, to show Israel "the way they are to live and how they are to behave." The New Testament concurs with this objective, but adds an essential caveat. Through no fault of its own, the Law never achieves this goal. It tells what to do, but does not empower obedience. What the Law could not do, however, the indwelling Christ and transforming Spirit actually achieve in us (Romans 68).

Thus, the two episodes of this chapter find their fulfillment in Jesus. He is deliverer, superior to all other supposed gods. He is also transformer, who accomplishes in us what the Law said to us.



"Praise be to the Lord, who rescued ... the people from the hand of the Egyptians. Now I know that the Lord is greater than all other gods" (18:10-11).

DAY 17

COVENANT: GRACE AND RECIPROCATATION

Exodus 19:1-8a

God promised to confirm Moses' calling after Israel left Egypt: "This will be the sign to you that it is I who have sent you: When you have brought the people out of Egypt, you will worship God on this mountain" (3:12). Three months after the exodus, they arrive at Mount Sinai (verses 1-2). They will remain here for nearly a year, through the remainder of Exodus, all of Leviticus, and up to Numbers 10.

This passage begins the second section of Exodus, chapters 19-24, which focus on the Ten Commandments (or Decalogue). In chapter 19, Moses makes three trips up Mount Sinai to hear from God, and then comes down to relay the message to Israel. The first trip – today's passage – overviews covenant terms and conditions, to confirm that Israel wants to be in a binding relationship with God. Given the basic similarity in structure, and the frequent reference to the Abrahamic covenant within Exodus and the Pentateuch, this is not a new and different covenant, but a continuation and development of the existing covenant with a new generation, now a nation.

What God said to them. Scholars generally agree that the covenant between God and Israel follows the ancient Near

Eastern pattern of a 'suzerainty treaty'; that is, a treaty between an empire and a vassal state (in distinction from a 'parity treaty' between equal powers). These political pacts follow a typical form:

- preamble, identifying the two parties to the covenant;
- prologue, summarizing the empire's benefactions toward the vassal;
- stipulations, setting out the vassal's reciprocal obligations; and, sanctions, listing benefits for compliance, or punishments for violations.

Here, as elsewhere in the Pentateuch, God uses a similar pattern to structure his relationship with Israel:

- preamble: the two parties are Yahweh and Israel (verse 3);
- prologue: God delivered Israel from Egypt (verse 4);
- stipulations: Israel is to obey God (verse 5a);
sanctions: if so, they will be God's special nation (verse 5b-6).

The covenant is considerably longer than these few verses; Deuteronomy, for instance, fleshes out the covenant in the form of an elongated suzerainty treaty. This passage is only a bare-bones overview, because God is simply seeking confirmation from Israel whether or not they wish to proceed.

Moses gathers the people to ask their intention. They reply together: “We will do everything the Lord has said” (verses 7-8a). With this response, God will set the process in motion, beginning with necessary protocols for Israel to follow so that they can safely approach Mount Sinai.



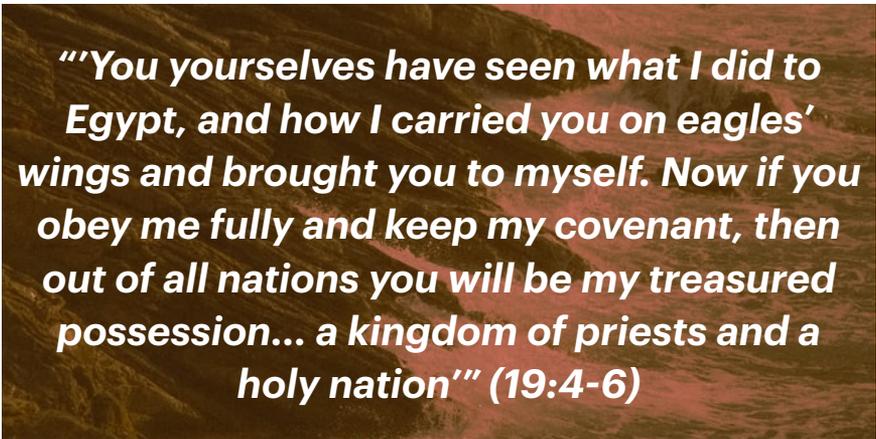
What God is saying to us. Today, many Christians have a vague sense that under the Old Covenant salvation was earned by works, or merited through obedience to the Law. By contrast, the view goes, the New Testament affirms salvation by grace through faith alone, with good works a preferred, but ultimately optional, outcome. This model is fatally flawed in both parts.

The Old Covenant begins with God graciously redeeming Israel from Egypt. Obedience does not earn or merit grace, but is the appropriate response to grace. If Israel obeys, they experience the covenant blessings. If they disobey, they suffer the covenant curses. For its part, the New Covenant also begins with grace, with God redeeming from sin. It also requires obedience in response to, and reciprocation for, grace.

Underlining the continuity, 1 Peter applies this passage from Exodus to his audience of gentile Christians: “You are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God’s special possession.” Gentile Christians now enjoy the same covenant blessing as Old Testament Israel, in fulfillment of God’s third promise to Abraham. The basis of salvation

remains the same, not human works but grace: “Once you were not a people, but now you are the people of God; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy.” The required response for salvation is comparable: “I urge you, as aliens and strangers in the world, to abstain from sinful desires” (1 Peter 2:9-11).

Old and New Covenants differ in important features. For example, the sacrifice of animals is fulfilled in the atoning death of Jesus, and the Law is no longer binding in its totality. But on two key points, Exodus 19 and 1 Peter 2 concur: divine grace initiates salvation; obedience is the necessary response. These are the terms of the covenant, both for Israel in the Old Testament, and for all peoples in the New.



DAY 18

PREPARATION: VALIDATION, PURIFICATION, AND DISTANCING

Exodus 19:8b-25

Now that Israel has agreed to being in covenant with God, some preparation is necessary. Moses ascends the mountain twice to learn the process, and returns to instruct Israel. From God's end, preparation involves public validation of Moses as covenant mediator. From Israel's end, preparation involves purification and distancing.

What God said to them. The validation of Moses forms a frame around the first half of this passage. God indicates that he will speak to Moses in a cloud, in the sight of the people (verse 9). But first, the people must prepare for an encounter with God.

Preparation has two facets: purification and distancing. To purify themselves, they are to wash their clothes and abstain from sex. (Leviticus later explains that bodily emissions are defiling.) To protect them from proximity to God, Moses is to set boundaries around the base of the mountain. Those who violate the boundaries are to be executed at a distance, by stone or arrow, to avoid contracting their contagion through touch. Moses descends from the mountain, and does as directed (verses 10-15).

With Israel suitably prepared, God descends on Mount Sinai in thunder and lightning. Israel gathers at the foot of the mountain, and hears Moses and God speak together, thus validating Moses as covenant mediator (verses 16-19).

At this point, the passage takes an unexpected turn, surprising not only to the reader, but also to Moses. Descending to the mountain, God again directs Moses to warn the people not to cross the boundary around its base. Moses dismisses the warning as redundant: he has already done so. Nevertheless, God insists: Aaron is to ascend, but no one else – neither priest nor people – lest God kill them (verses 20-25). The narrative is gnarled, but purposefully so: the four-fold repetition stresses the importance of distancing from God.

In short, in its entirety, chapter 19 sets the stage for the covenant by characterizing the various participants. God is gracious, but potentially dangerous. Israel is precious to him, but must not be casual with him. Consequently, Moses mediates between the two.

In a sense, today's passage offsets yesterday's reading. Obey God, and be his special people (verses 3-8a). Presume upon that status by being overly familiar – either by approaching while unconsecrated or by coming too close – and be killed by God (verses 8b-25). Israel has been doubly privileged: rescued from Egypt, and appointed God's special people. But these privileges will not keep them safe if they treat him casually. The severity of this warning

explains why Moses needs strong public validation: he speaks not on his own authority, but only as God directs.



What God is saying to us. The book of Hebrews explicitly references this incident and passage, supplemented with Deuteronomy 9. It both contrasts and compares Israelite and Christian experience.

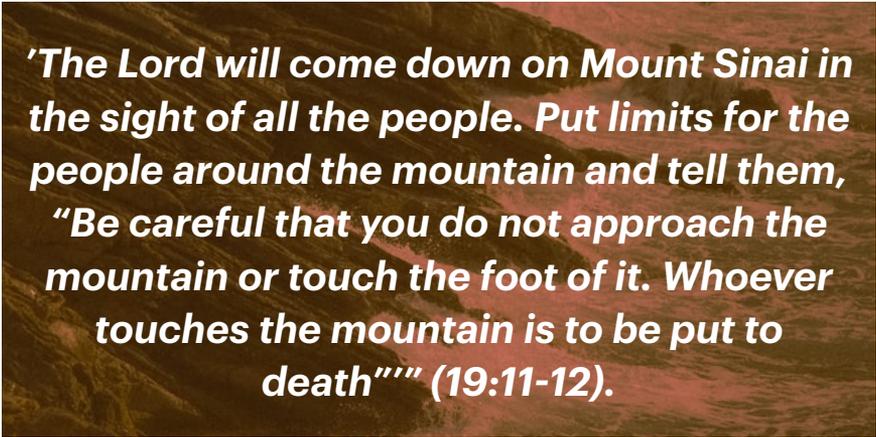
First, the contrast. Unlike Israel, Christians do not stand at a distance from Mount Sinai, cloaked in gloom and storm, so that we tremble with fear, and beg to hear no more from God. Instead, we come to the metaphorical Mount Zion, heavenly Jerusalem. In place of desolation, this mountain is occupied by thousands upon thousands of angels, joining in joyful worship. Instead of standing far off from God, we approach him. He remains judge of all, but we are now cleansed from sin by the blood of Jesus, better mediator of a better covenant (Hebrews 12:18-24).

Secondly, the comparison. Since our privilege is all the greater, so is the urgency of our response. The consequences of rejection are all the more severe for us. If Israel did not escape God's judgment when refusing his beneficences, how will we escape if we turn from even greater blessings? So we must pursue holiness, and eschew immorality (Hebrews 12:25-27).

Hebrews 12 concludes by merging both contrast and comparison in a solemn exhortation: "Therefore... let us be

thankful, and so worship God acceptably with reverence and awe, for our ‘God is a consuming fire’” (Hebrews 12:28-29 cf. Deuteronomy 4:24).

Our benefits are greater; so is our corresponding responsibility, because our God is the same as theirs. In making this point, the author of Hebrews does not overlook the love and grace of God, but accents both his generosity and his severity. While Mount Zion is not ‘burning with fire’ (12:18), God remains ‘a consuming fire’ (12:29). We come to him with joyful gratitude, and with utmost respect.



‘The Lord will come down on Mount Sinai in the sight of all the people. Put limits for the people around the mountain and tell them, “Be careful that you do not approach the mountain or touch the foot of it. Whoever touches the mountain is to be put to death”’ (19:11-12).

DAY 19

THE TEN COMMANDMENTS

Exodus 20:1-21

The Ten Commandments is one of the most familiar passages of the Old Testament, even if most people cannot list its specifics. Interestingly, while all Christian traditions concur on the total, two numbering systems exist. Most Orthodox and Protestant traditions differentiate the bans on other gods and images as the first two commandments, while combining all the coveting prohibitions into one. Catholic and Lutheran traditions, on the other hand, combine the bans as the first commandment, while differentiating the coveting prohibitions into two (wife, possessions).

The meaning of the commandments is generally transparent, so they do not require detailed comment. A few general observations will suffice.

What God said to them. First, confirming what we saw in chapter 19, the Commandments are not a mechanism for earning salvation, they are a response to grace. The passage begins by reminding Israel of God's gracious initiative: "I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery" (verse 2 cf. chapter 19).

Secondly, law codes generally take one of two forms: generic principles (technically, 'apodictic'), or detailed case-

study. The U.S. tax code is a classic example of the latter; the Ten Commandments, the former. The Commandments provide general guidelines or identify specific cases from which readers can extrapolate broader principles. The Commandments are broad, foundational, and representative, with more detailed laws following in chapters 21-23, and especially in Leviticus.

Thirdly, the Commandments naturally divide into two categories. The first four govern relationship with God: other gods, idols, (mis)use of his name, Sabbath observance. The last six govern human relationships: honoring parents, murder, adultery, stealing, lying, and coveting. Given that God has redeemed Israel as a people, it makes sense that the code of values and conduct covers both how Israel treats him, and how they treat one another.

Finally, these commandments are not arbitrary, but share a certain logic. They are largely comparable to the sorts of commitments that we make in any intimate relationship: exclusivity, no pornography, no name-calling, time together, respect for in-laws, no domestic violence, sexual fidelity, financial integrity, truth-telling, and fiscal self-control. God has committed himself to Israel; now he calls Israel to reciprocate by committing themselves to him on much the same terms as they would commit to one another in marriage.

The closing verses underscore the gravity of this encounter by returning to the imagery of the previous chapter: thunder and lightning, smoke and fire, rumbling mountain,

unapproachable God in the distance (verses 18-21). This God has the power to enforce his authority.



What God is saying to us. The New Testament largely assumes the abiding validity of the Ten Commandments. When a man asks how he might attain eternal life, Jesus begins: “You know the commandments: “Do not commit adultery, do not murder, do not steal, do not give false testimony, honor your father and mother.”” When the man claims to have kept all those, Jesus turns his attention to the tenth commandment: “Do not covet.” If that is a condition for attaining eternal life, the inquirer declines (Luke 18:18-27).

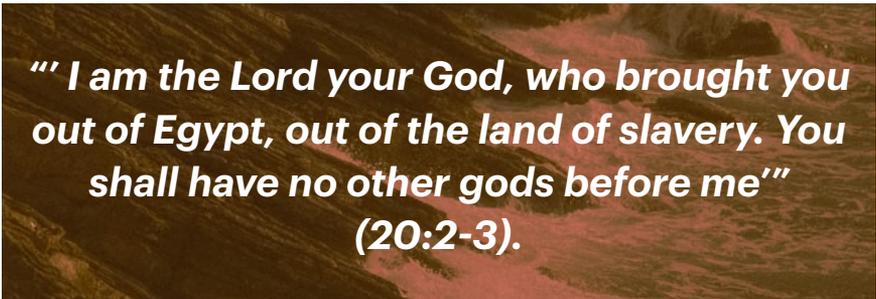
Jesus does not dismiss the Ten Commandments as redundant; he intensifies them. In the Sermon on the Mount, he famously extends the prohibition against murder to anger; that against adultery, to lust (Matthew 5:21-30). On another occasion, he condenses the Commandments to their essence, collating the entire Law and prophets under two headings: love God and love your neighbor as yourself (Matthew 22:34-40). Elsewhere, he warns against overly scrupulous application of the Commandments, for example, Sabbath observance (Matthew 12:1-14 cf. Mark 2:23-3:6). In these and other cases, the New Testament assumes the continuing validity of the Ten Commandments, while tweaking details of application and implementation.

The apostle Paul concurs. If the ‘law of love’ supersedes the Ten Commandments, it is only because love fulfills all the

commandments (Romans 13:8-10). For Paul, the Ten Commandments continue to demarcate both virtue (e.g., Ephesians 6:1), and vice (e.g., 1 Timothy 1:9-10).

The one ambiguity relates to the fourth commandment, Sabbath observance. Differentiating biblical requirements from personal convictions, the apostle Paul writes, “One person considers one day more sacred than another; another considers every day alike. Each one of them should be fully convinced in their own mind” (Romans 14:5). This appears to relativize Sabbath observance. Opinions differ, but the ambiguity at least raises the possibility that Christians need not strictly observe the Sabbath.

Concretely, given the centrality of the Ten Commandments to biblical ethics, it is appropriate for all believers to take the modest time required to memorize the order and gist of the commands.



***“ I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery. You shall have no other gods before me”
(20:2-3).***

DAY 20

THE BOOK OF THE COVENANT

Exodus 20:22-23:33

The terms of the covenant now shift from the general principles of the Ten Commandments to specific proscriptions, and from thematic coherence to looser collections. The various commands and prohibitions address Israel's responsibilities either toward God or toward one another. God has acted not simply to rescue individuals, but to redeem an entire people.

One other overall feature deserves notice. The content and tone reinforce the perspective that has directed the narrative from Genesis 3 forward. Prohibitions vastly outnumber commands. Attention is less on ways for them to bless each other, and more on restricting the harm that they inflict on one another. This law is designed for a fallen people in a fallen world.

What God said to them. The underlying logic that directs the content and development of this passage is not transparent. (It may not even need to exist: modern interpreters must not force thematic coherence on an ancient genre that may not have required it.) That noted, the material loosely combines in topical paragraphs. Though even when we cannot account for its arrangement, the meaning of the text is generally clear.

Like the Ten Commandments, the passage begins with the worship of God, prohibiting images, and prescribing the building of altars and the offering of sacrifice (20:22-26).

Then, befitting Israel's deliverance from slavery in Egypt, God sets out protections for indentured servants, whether with or without families, in temporary or permanent servitude. He also establishes safeguards for Israelite women bought to be brides (21:1-11).

The third section details the application of the sixth commandment, the prohibition against murder. It differentiates penalties for deliberate murder, accidental murder, violence toward a parent, violence that leads to permanent disability or temporary injury, as well as violence to slaves and pregnant women (21:12-27).

Violence between humans segues into violence between humans and animals. Sanctions punish animals that kill humans, with lesser penalties for the death of a slave. Humans who carelessly kill someone else's animals are to be fined. They are also fined if their animal kills another animal (21:28-36).

Property loss from unintentional death transitions into property loss from misconduct, including theft, trespass, arson, irresponsibility, and seduction (22:1-17).

The sixth section returns to worship practices, proscribing death for spirit mediums, for fertility rites involving bestiality, and for worship of other gods (22:18-20).

The next section returns to the protection of the defenseless; this time, immigrants, widows, orphans, and the poor (22:21-27).

Worship practices appear a third time, with a call for respect and monetary offerings to God (22:28-31).

Subsequent sections relate more closely to particular commandments, including: the ninth, integrity in court cases (23:1-9); and the fourth, compliance with Sabbath regulations (23:10-13), along with the observance of annual religious festivals (23:14-19).

The promulgation of laws ends with an incentive: if his people obey him, God will lead them into their new land, fighting for them, and driving out its current inhabitants (23:20-33).



What God is saying to us. The most obvious feature of contemporary application is that many of these specific laws are no longer relevant to us. Some address situations that are uncommon in our culture (e.g., slavery, spirit mediums, fertility rites). Some are regulated by contemporary secular law (e.g., violence, theft). Others are religiously passé for most Christians (e.g., Jewish festivals). Beyond the specific provisions, the Law as a whole no longer governs Christian worship and obedience. These differences acknowledged, several points from this passage remain relevant.

For one, spiritual life is not just a matter of belief in God. It necessarily expresses itself in action, in a lifestyle that adheres to Scripture. Even though some specifics vary, the New Testament affirms this truth no less than the Old. Paul's epistles, for instance, consistently begin with what God has done for us ('the indicative'), then segue to what we are to do for him and for others ('the imperative').

For another, spiritual commitment expresses itself not just in broad strokes, but in the details. Exodus does not stop with the lofty principles of the Ten Commandments, but moves immediately into specifics. So, too, the New Testament includes a significant number of 'virtue and vice lists', providing specific directions for Christian behavior.

Finally, the numerous categories of this passage bring to mind Jesus' summary of the Law and the Prophets: "Love the Lord your God ... and love your neighbor as yourself" (Matthew 22:37-40). If we follow his two rubrics, we will end up doing all that God still expects from this list.



“Be careful to do everything I have said to you” (23:13).

DAY 21

THE RATIFICATION OF THE COVENANT

Exodus 24

This chapter provides a notable illustration of Old Testament narrative technique. At first glance, it seems disorganized. In verses 1-2, God calls for Moses to escort the top leadership of Israel part-way up Mount Sinai for worship and a shared meal, before he travels the rest of the way alone into the presence of the Lord. Moses does so, in the designated two stages, in verses 9-11 and verses 12-18, respectively. Verses 3-8 have nothing to do with that itinerary, instead covering the ratification of the covenant, which would seem to fit better at the end of chapter 23. Thus, the text would read more smoothly if reordered: verses 3-8,1-2,9-18.

On the other hand, in its present order, the chapter integrates three functions: it completes the frame enclosing chapters 19-24; it contributes to the overall storyline; and, it transitions to the third and final section of Exodus, chapters 25-40. We consider its three functions in that order.

What God said to them. As noted in previous readings, chapters 19-24 set out the terms of the covenant; that is, what God expects of Israel in reciprocation for his grace toward them. His expectations develop in two parts: the

general principles of the Ten Commandments (chapter 20), and an expanded set of specific guidelines in the Book of the Covenant (chapters 21-23). Chapters 19 and 24 frame those laws within narrative. Structurally, both chapters 19 and 24 portray Moses repeatedly ascending and descending Mount Sinai, to bring messages from God to Israel. Thematically, Israel first consents to obey all covenant stipulations (19:8); then God lays out his expectations (chapters 20-23); and Israel pledges to obey (24:3,7).

With respect to the overall storyline, verses 3-8 record the ratification of the covenant, as the culmination of chapters 19-24. Israel pledges to observe all that the Lord commands. Moses builds an altar and sets up twelve stone memorials representing the twelve tribes. They sacrifice burnt offerings (devoted entirely to God in atonement for sin), and fellowship offerings (shared in a meal among the worshippers). Moses collects the blood from the sacrifices, and sprinkles half on the altar. The people repeat their pledge to obey, then Moses sprinkles them with the remainder of the blood, announcing, "This is the blood of the covenant that the Lord has made with you."

Chapter 24 also transitions to the final section of Exodus, chapters 25-40. God directs Moses to gather the national leadership (verses 1-2). He escorts them part-way up Mount Sinai to worship and share a meal in sight of God (verses 9-11). Then he travels on alone, into the cloud and glorious presence of the Lord, in order to receive a copy of the Law carved on stone tablets (verses 12-18). He remains on the

mountain forty days and nights. During that time, God will supply the plans for the construction of the tabernacle, which Moses will reveal to the people in chapters 25-40.

Thus, this chapter signals the completion of the second section of Exodus, reports the ratification of the covenant, and transitions to the third section, providing the plans for the construction of the tabernacle as a mobile home for God.

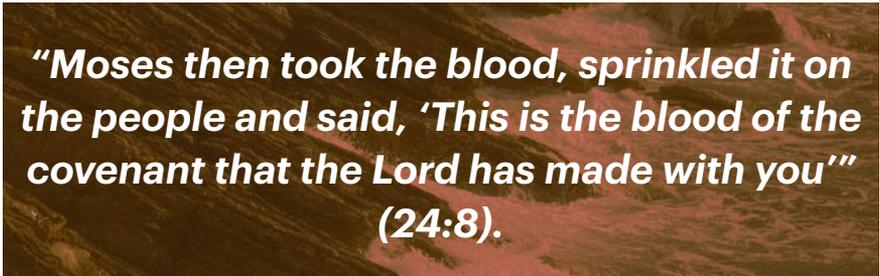


What God is saying to us. Exodus 24 features prominently within the New Testament, in a couple different contexts.

“This is the blood of the covenant”: these words are familiar from the institution of the Lord’s Supper. In the context of his final Passover meal with the disciples, Jesus passes a cup of wine among them, saying, “This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins” (Matthew 26:27-28). As in Exodus 24, Jesus’ blood ratifies the New Covenant, cleanses from sin, and is celebrated in a fellowship meal (though today many Christian traditions reduce that meal to a small wafer and a tiny cup).

The author of Hebrews also references Exodus 24. He cites three aspects of the incident: the use of blood in the ratification of the covenant, the requirement to obey its stipulations, and the role of blood in the forgiveness of sin: “[Moses] sprinkled the scroll and all the people. He said,

'This is the blood of the covenant, which God has commanded you to keep'... The law requires that nearly everything be cleansed with blood, and without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness." In all three respects, this incident points forward to the new covenant in Christ, who does away with sin, once for all, by the sacrifice of himself (Hebrews 9:19-28).



DAY 22

IF YOU BUILD IT, I WILL COME

Exodus 25-40 Overview

To review, the first section of Exodus narrated the escape from Egypt, as the first stage in their return to Canaan, in fulfillment of the Abrahamic promise of land (chapters 1-15). After an interlude (chapters 16-18), the second section recounted the giving of Law, with obedience as a condition for continuing under God's blessing (chapters 19-24). Now, the third section provides detailed directions for the construction of a mobile tabernacle, so that God can dwell in the midst of his people while they journey to Canaan (chapters 25-40). Today we survey the overall theme of this third section. Subsequent readings reflect on smaller portions of the text.

What God said to them. The first paragraph introduces the theme of the entire section. In particular, God makes a promise, and sets out a condition. His promise: he will dwell in the midst of Israel. The condition: they must build him a sanctuary (25:1-9).

The tabernacle addresses a problem that goes all the way back to Eden. Once, God walked in the garden that he shared with Adam and Eve. Their sin first prompted them to hide from him, and then compelled him to banish them (Genesis 3). From that time on, a chasm separated God from those whom he made in his image. Reversing the

effects of the Fall, God now promises, “I will dwell among them” (25:8). This is a spectacular development, a major step toward restoring Eden.

At the same time, it is problematic. Proximity to a holy God is a threat to sinners, and proximity to sinners could foul the sanctity of God. So if God is to dwell in their midst, his presence must be circumscribed for their safety, and his purity must be protected from their corruption. Therefore, God sets out a condition for him to dwell among them: “Have them make a sanctuary for me, and I will dwell among them” (25:8). The purpose of the tabernacle is to permit proximity between God and his people, while also while ensuring safe distance between the two, for both their sakes.

This promise and condition structure chapters 25-40. In chapters 25-31, God provides a blueprint for the tabernacle, its furnishings, and its equipment. In chapters 35-40, the Israelites build it according to plan. Separating these two accounts, there is an horrendous disruption. Between God giving them the plans for the tabernacle, and Israel constructing the tent, they apostatize. In chapters 32-34, while Moses remains on the mountain obtaining the blueprints, they collect their gold jewelry, and press Aaron to fashion a golden calf, leading them in worship of these ‘gods who brought [them] up out of Egypt’.

We will look at the details in the days to come. For the moment, the grand sweep of these chapters offers at least two lessons. First, God is remarkably gracious in

condescending to dwell among these people who are so corrupt that they do not remain faithful to him for a mere forty days. Even Aaron is so weak that he succumbs to pressure rather than rallying them to stand firm.

Secondly, the juxtaposition of events – tabernacle, idolatry, tabernacle – hints at the seeds of Israel’s destruction. Given that they cannot remain faithful for forty days, how will they ever manage to be faithful perpetually so that God can dwell in their midst? God proposed the tabernacle as a way for him to dwell in their midst without destroying them, or being corrupted by them. Construction has not even begun and it has already proved ineffective.

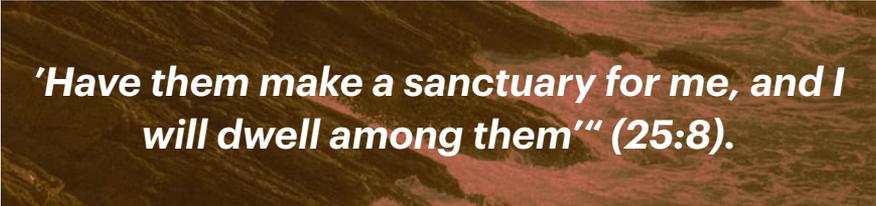


What God is saying to us. The apostle John weaves these same two lessons into the opening chapters of his Gospel. In an allusion that English translation does not readily capture, he uses a verbal form of ‘tabernacle’ to describe the incarnation: “The Word became flesh and ‘tabernacled’ among us” (John 1:14). In a sense which would have astounded Moses, Jesus is the new and truer tabernacle: the presence of God dwelling among us, not only in the midst of humanity, but even within human flesh.

John makes this point in proximity to the account of the cleansing of the temple. Within the temple courts, Jesus finds traders disrupting worship by selling the paraphernalia needed for sacrifice. He drives them out: “Stop turning my Father’s house into a market!” (John 2:12-22).

Neither the tabernacle nor its successor, the temple, accomplished God's purposes. So he sent his son incarnate. No longer do we seek access to God via a physical building, even one that he explicitly designed, one built exactly according to his specifications. Instead, we encounter God in Jesus.

God made a sanctuary for himself, and dwelt among us.



'Have them make a sanctuary for me, and I will dwell among them' (25:8).

DAY 23

BUILD IT EXACTLY AS I SAY

Exodus 25-31

As noted yesterday, chapters 25-40 break down into three sections, chapters 25-31, 32-34, and 35-40. Today we survey the breadth of chapters 25-31. Subsequent readings consider its subunits.

What God said to them. Ironically, the central theme of this lengthy passage is precisely what makes it boring to us: its detail and precision. God promises: “Have them make a sanctuary for me, and I will dwell among them.” He adds a qualification: “Make this tabernacle and all its furnishings exactly like the pattern I will show you” (25:1-9).

This requirement explains the entirety of chapters 25-31: God provides a blueprint for them to follow in constructing the tabernacle and its furnishings. The text breaks down the construction plans into eleven items for use in tabernacle worship, along with several related instructions:

- 25:1-9 the donation of materials;
- 25:10-22 specifications for the ark;
- 25:23-30 specifications for the table;
- 25:31-40 specifications for the lampstand;
- 26:1-37 specifications for the tabernacle;
- 27:1-8 specifications for the altar of burnt offerings;

- 27:9-19 specifications for the tabernacle courtyard;
- 27:20-21 the donation of oil for the lamps;
- 28:1-43 specifications for priestly vestments;
- 29:1-46 specifications for the consecration of priests;
- 30:1-10 specifications for the incense altar;
- 30:11-16 the donation of funds;
- 30:17-21 specifications for the wash basin;
- 30:22-33 specifications for anointing oil;
- 30:34-38 specifications for incense;
- 31:1-11 specifications for supervisors and craftsmen;
- 31:12-17 command to keep the Sabbath.

The number of items on the list, and the detail devoted to each, indicate an extraordinary concern for exactitude.

Occasional comments interspersed throughout the section reinforce the point, as though that were necessary: “Make this tabernacle and all its furnishings exactly like the pattern I will show you” (25:9); “See that you make them according to the pattern shown you on the mountain” (25:40); “Set up the tabernacle according to the plan shown you on the mountain” (26:30); “It is to be made just as you were shown on the mountain” (27:8); “They are to make them just as I commanded you” (31:11). The specifications exist not simply as a helpful guide to construction; they are mandates from God that he deems essential.

Moses’ audience would have understood this requirement from their experience in Egypt: just as emperors require palaces, deities require temples. Both reflect the prestige of

their residents. So they are necessarily ornate, lavishly appointed, richly furnished, constructed by the most skilled craftsmen, according to the highest standards, strictly in accordance with specifications.



What God is saying to us. These seven chapters again challenge our tendency to apply Scripture by asking: “What does this passage mean to me?” This section exists because God commanded that they build the tabernacle, and because he insisted that they construct the specified items in particular ways. That is what it meant to them. It did not apply to their private lives. It applied to the architecture of their worship structure. It does not now somehow apply to our personal lives. Nor do its various details reveal Christ, if read in a certain way.

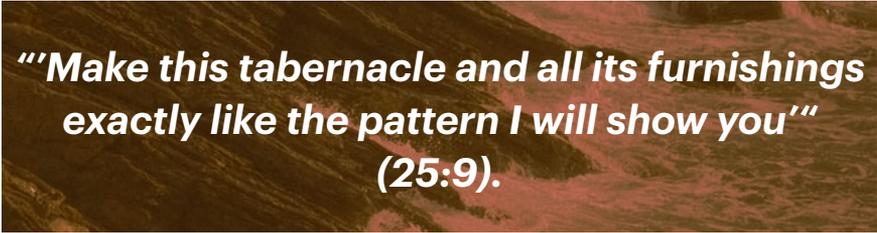
Does this mean that there is no point in our reading these chapters unless we intend, for some reason never anticipated in the New Testament, to construct a replica tabernacle? Even if the details do not warrant close scrutiny, the gist is instructive: God offers to dwell in the midst of his people, but they must provide him fitting residence.

Thinking back to yesterday’s application, it makes sense that Jesus, sinless son of God, could be a tabernacle fit for God. What is baffling is that we, fallen and sinful, could be the dwelling place of God. Yet the apostle Paul refers both to our churches, messy though they are, and our bodies, messy though we are, as temples for God (1 Corinthians

3:16-17; 6:19-20). Read against the backdrop of these chapters, his application is astounding.

While God's standards for suitable housing appear to have dropped precipitously, they have not degenerated entirely. For Paul warns the Corinthians that if their church conflicts destroy God's temple, God will destroy them (1 Corinthians 3:16-17). Similarly, since Christ indwells their bodies by his Spirit, they are obliged to honor God with those bodies, which entails, at the very least, not patronizing the sex industry (1 Corinthians 6:19-20).

We are privileged that both our communities and our bodies are tabernacles of God. At the same time, it is essential that we adhere strictly to the standards that he sets for the venues where he dwells.



***“Make this tabernacle and all its furnishings exactly like the pattern I will show you”
(25:9).***

DAY 24

TABERNACLE FURNISHINGS

Exodus 25

Like contemporary church building projects, this one begins with a collection. Unlike contemporary building projects, God sets out detailed specifications, for interior fixtures in this chapter, and for exterior structure in the next.

What God said to them. To build and outfit this tabernacle to the appropriate standard will require widespread support and generous contributions. Two factors prompt Israelites to give: God's command through Moses, and their own inner motivation. Offerings provide all the upscale materials the craftsmen will need to fashion a tabernacle fit for this majestic God (verses 1-9).

Tomorrow's reading explains that the tabernacle is to consist of three spaces of increasing access and decreasing sanctity: the Most Holy Place, the Holy Place, and the public courtyard. This chapter describes three of the four furnishings within the restricted areas of the tabernacle.

Within the Most Holy Place is a single piece of equipment, the ark of the covenant. It consists of two parts: a chest, 45 inches x 28 inches x 28 inches, and a cover, 45 inches x 28 inches (a 'cubit' is roughly eighteen inches). Both are wood, overlaid with pure gold. The chest has four feet, with a ring attached to each, and poles for carrying the ark without

touching it. The cover is decorated with two cherubim, one at either end, facing inward, with wings outstretched. The ark stores the Ten Commandments. Above the ark, between the cherubim, God will meet with Moses, to give him directives for Israel (verses 10-22). (Additionally, according to Leviticus 16, the cover is a special place of atonement.) Metaphorically, the ark is a footstool for God, and the cherubim likely carry his invisible throne.

Within the Holy Place are three objects: this chapter describes two of them. One is a table, 36 inches x 18 inches x 27 inches, made of wood overlaid with pure gold, rimmed with a gold molding. The table also has gold rings, with wood poles for carrying. On top of the table are gold plates and dishes, pitchers and bowls, a symbolic place setting for God. The plates hold loaves of bread (called 'the bread of the Presence'). The pitchers and bowls supply drink offerings, libations that accompany sacrifices (verses 23-30).

The other object described here is a lampstand. The candelabrum is of unspecified height, made from a single piece of pure gold, a talent's worth (about 75 pounds in weight, or nearly \$2 million at 2020 prices). It has six branches, three extending from either side of a central trunk. Each branch ends in three cups, shaped like almond blossoms, with four cups on the trunk. The cups hold seven lamps altogether, which, we later learn are kept burning all night. The necessary accessories, such as wick trimmers and trays, are also made of pure gold (verses 31-40 cf. 27:21).



What God is saying to us. Given that such equipment is no longer required in our churches, this chapter can seem irrelevant (though we certainly give plenty of attention to the furnishings of our private homes). In an effort to evoke interest, some interpreters mine the details for hidden theological insight, though much of what is discovered is read into the text, rather than out of it. The New Testament does, however, reference all three of these pieces of furniture. Due to space limitations, this reading restricts its focus to the lampstand.

As one of the few furnishings in the tabernacle, the lampstand becomes a symbol of Israel in the presence of God. In Zechariah 4, Jews who return from Babylonian exile struggle to rebuild the temple in the face of local opposition. The prophet portrays this beleaguered community as a glorious golden lampstand, ablaze with light, fueled by oil of the Spirit, channeled through two olive trees, representing the governor Zerubbabel and the high-priest Joshua (Zechariah 4:1-14). Though outwardly the community is small and struggling, in the eyes of God, it shines brightly with him and for him.

In a comparably adversarial situation, the elder John adapts the same imagery in the book of Revelation. The lampstand now represents the various Christian communities of Asia Minor (roughly speaking, modern Turkey). Disowned by the synagogue, they are unable to claim the exemption from emperor worship typically granted to Jews. Consequently,

they suffer virulent persecution. But so long as they remain faithful to God, they will shine brightly for Jesus and in his presence (Revelation 1:12,13,20[2x]; 2:1,5). Like post-exilic Israel, they also have two divinely-appointed leaders, unconquerable until their mission is complete. Once martyred, they resurrect and ascend into heaven (Revelation 11:1-13).

Where beleaguered, the faithful Church finds strength in this, that despite its oppression, it is a lampstand of pure gold and great value, shining brightly for God in the midst of darkness, like the menorah in the ancient tabernacle.



***“Make a lampstand of pure gold” (25:31).
(25:9).***

DAY 25

THE TABERNACLE

Exodus 26

After describing the tabernacle furnishings, God turns to its structure. Since he no longer requires that we follow these specifications for our worship spaces, modern readers tend to find this material boring. On the other hand, television programs devoted to the design and renovation of private homes are quite popular currently. If we find the details of some stranger's house interesting, it is not too much to give attention to the particulars of God's ancient residence.

What God said to them. Since Israel is on the move, if God is to dwell in their midst, his residence must be portable. Toward this end, the tabernacle consists of layers of curtains draped over a wood frame.

The walls and roof consist of four layers. The innermost layer is decorative. Ten curtains, each forty-two feet by six feet, are woven from tricolor linen yarn, and embedded with a cherubim motif. The curtains are combined into two panels of five each, which in turn are linked by cloth loops and gold rings, for a total curtain space of forty-two feet by sixty feet. Forming the ceiling and side walls, the curtains encompass floor space of forty-five by fifteen feet (verses 1-6).

The delicate linen curtain is protected by a second, tougher layer, woven from goat hair, and slightly larger for overlap. Eleven goat-hair curtains are divided into two unequal panels, with the extra portion available to close off the entrance, as needed. The two panels are joined by loops, connected this time with bronze rings (verses 7-13).

The outer two layers are described more briefly. Each is made of leather: first ram skin, and the outermost layer, sea-cow hide (a water creature akin to manatee or dugong) (verse 14).

These layers are spread over a wood frame, consisting of paired studs, fifteen feet high, spaced twenty-seven inches apart. Each frame is mounted on a double base made of silver. The north and south walls consist of twenty frames each, butting against each other. The west wall consists of six frames, doubled in the corners. The east wall is left open for access by priests. Crossbars provide strength and stability to the frames. Both frames and crossbars are overlaid with gold (verses 15-29).

Another curtain – also tricolor linen, embedded with cherubim design – hangs internally to separate the Most Holy Place from the Holy Place (verses 30-35). A final tricolor linen curtain hangs on gilded posts with bronze bases, over the entrance to the tabernacle (verses 36-37).

We need to be cautious about seeking interpretative significance in all the details of the tabernacle structure. Much of the design reflects standard construction practices

in ancient nomadic cultures, duplicated among Israel's neighbors. We are on firmer ground, though, when it comes to the main features of the tabernacle.

Primary among them, the tabernacle addresses the same problem that manifest during the giving of the Law at Sinai (chapters 19-24). On the one hand, God has promised to be 'with' his people as they move into the new land (Genesis 26:3,24; 28:15; 31:3; 46:4; 48:21; Exodus 3:12). On the other hand, he must maintain some distance from them, both to safeguard his holiness, and to preserve their lives.

The tabernacle implements this goal in the same way as Mount Sinai: by establishing a gradation of proximity between God and man. The people enter the courtyard of the tabernacle, but no further. Priests enter the curtain into the Holy Place. Only the high priest enters the Most Holy Place, inner sanctum of the tabernacle.



What God is saying to us. Important features distinguish this tabernacle from modern church sanctuaries. Its design derives from the edict of God, not the creativity of an architect, or the tastes of the worshippers. It is a sacred space, not a convenience to facilitate worship. It exists to keep people out, not to make them comfortable within. As a result, the tabernacle has little direct bearing on worship structures in the New Testament or today.

The author of Hebrews does, however, invoke the architecture of the tabernacle (and temple) to celebrate what Christ accomplished. Previously, the Most Holy Place was open only to the high priest, only once a year, on the Day of Atonement. The Holy Place was open only to priests, daily, to make offerings for sin, while the people massed outside, in the courtyard, forbidden to approach further. Now, however, Christ has died to atone for sin, and lives to serve as our high priest. As a result, we can enter through the curtain, directly into the Most Holy Place, into the very presence of God. Therefore, Hebrews encourages us to make use of this unprecedented access: “Let us draw near to God with a sincere heart” (Hebrews 10:19-22).



‘The curtain will separate the Holy Place from the Most Holy Place’” (26:33).

DAY 26

THE TABERNACLE COURT AND ALTAR

Exodus 27

Thus far, God has given directions for the construction of the tabernacle furnishings (25:10-40), and structure (26:1-36). Now focus shifts to the tabernacle enclosure, in the same order: first, its furnishing, and then its structure. An addendum covers the oil for the lamps.

What God said to them. Like most other pieces of tabernacle furniture, the altar of burnt offering is made of wood overlaid, in this instance, with bronze. The altar stands roughly four feet high, with a square top, seven feet per side. Four horns, one at each corner, serve partly in ritual, partly for tying down the sacrifice. Like the other equipment found in the public area, the accessories and utensils are made of bronze (rather than the gold used in the more sacred areas of the tabernacle). The altar also has the usual rings with wooden poles for transporting it without direct touch. As with the other furniture and facilities, these specifications are not exhaustive, so Moses will supplement as needed from what he saw in his vision on Sinai (verses 1-8).

The courtyard is rectangular, 150 feet by 75 feet. Similar to the tabernacle, but simpler, the walls are made of linen

curtains, seven feet high. The curtains hang by silver hooks, from wooden posts with bronze bases. Twenty posts line the north and south sides, with half as many on the west. Entry is from the east, so its configuration necessarily varies slightly: two curtains of twenty-two feet prevent access along the edges, while a center curtain of tricolor linen, thirty feet long, serves as an entrance (verses 9-19).

A brief addendum requires the people to provide olive oil, so that the priests can keep the lamps in the Holy Place burning all night (verses 20-21).



What God is saying to us. Yesterday's reading reflected on the three-fold structure formed by the courtyard, Holy Place, and Most Holy Place. So this reading considers the relevance of the altar, and of architecture generally.

The role of altars in Christian churches was a major debate during the Protestant Reformation (sixteenth and seventeenth centuries). By definition, an altar is for offering sacrifice. Within medieval theology, the 'liturgy of the Holy Eucharist' includes the transformation of the communion elements into the literal body and blood of Christ, and his sacrifice anew on the 'altar'. Within this conceptual framework, the elements become sacred, and the celebration of the Eucharist is generally the focus of the worship service.

The Protestant Reformers objected to much of this. Christ died for sin once for all to take away sin; he is not sacrificed anew each week (Hebrews 9:23-10:4). Holy Communion is not a sacrifice, but a commemoration of his once-for-all sacrifice on the cross. Consequently, the wooden structure is no altar, but a communion table, 'the table of the Lord' (1 Corinthians 10:21), where believers participate with the Lord in a symbolic meal (originally, it was a literal meal). The center of a typical Protestant worship service is not the Eucharist, but the preaching of Scripture. So the focus of historic Protestant church architecture is not an 'altar', or even a communion table, but a pulpit or a Bible.

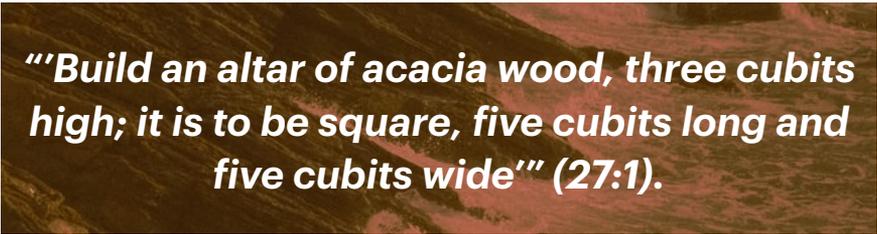
A brief devotional is not the place to debate the merits of either perspective, or to resolve the issue. But it is appropriate to point out the importance of these sorts of questions. The New Testament knows nothing of Christian sacred buildings: the church gatherings were mostly modest in size, and, as best we know, generally met in private homes or public halls. But once the Church grew to sufficient density to justify constructing specialized worship structures, they gave careful thought to how to express Christian beliefs architecturally.

It is a legitimate discussion whether churches should build custom buildings, or meet in shared facilities. If the decision is made to construct dedicated worship facilities, it is a legitimate discussion which theological values to express in the design and furnishings, and what forms best express those values. What is largely unprecedented, until recently, is the construction of dedicated facilities without

considering how best to express Christian values architecturally.

With little reflection, we have exchanged soaring spires for massive warehouses, cruciform sanctuaries for auditoriums, pulpits for lecterns, kneelers for theater seating, incense censers for fog machines, stained-glass windows for audio-visual screens, and communion tables for snack bars. Architecturally, our facilities no longer embody the majesty of a transcendent God, but prioritize the comfort and entertainment of the consumer.

Architecture communicates theology. Like Exodus 27 and our Protestant forebears, we should be intentional about the message we want our facilities to communicate. Otherwise, we will merely imitate and communicate the values of contemporary culture.



“Build an altar of acacia wood, three cubits high; it is to be square, five cubits long and five cubits wide” (27:1).

DAY 27

PRIESTS: ATTIRE

Exodus 28

Just as the worship of Jehovah requires a sacred facility, it also requires sacred personnel: “So I will consecrate the tent of meeting and the altar and will consecrate Aaron and his sons to serve me as priests” (29:44). The appointment of personnel has two parts: sacral vestments (chapter 28), and ordination (chapter 29). We look at the former today; the latter, tomorrow.

What God said to them. Repetition frames this passage (‘inclusion’). Aaron and his sons are to serve in a hereditary priesthood, with sacred garments. The outfits are sewn by tailors with special skills and divine endowment. The attire – in the same colors as the tabernacle curtains – is designed to accord them ‘dignity and honor’, a status that derives from their role in ‘serving’ God. For this function, they are to be consecrated, anointed, and ordained (verses 1-5,41).

The bulk of the chapter describes the apparel item by item, with particular attention to the garments for the high priest.

The ephod covers the torso, from shoulder to thigh, excluding arms and legs. It includes the names of the twelve tribes of Israel (verses 6-14).

The breastpiece is made of similar material, roughly eighteen inches square, decorated with twelve precious stones, in four rows of three stones, representing the tribes of Israel. Its four corners are connected to the ephod by braided chains of pure gold. The breastpiece holds the urim and thummim, used to provide guidance to inquirers, though the precise shape and mode of operation are lost to history (verses 15-30).

The next three vestments are covered more briefly. The high priest wears a robe, with reinforced collar, pomegranate decorations, and bells on the hem so that spectators can track his progress through the ritual (verses 31-35). He also wears a turban with front plate (verses 36-38), as well as a tunic and sash (verse 39).

Rank-and-file priests wear similar, but fewer, garments; particularly, a tunic, sash, and cap (verse 40).

One item is omitted for all priests: footwear. Apparently priests served barefoot.

Duly attired, the priests are to be anointed and ordained (verse 41). This is elaborated in chapter 29, and enacted in Leviticus 8 (again illustrating that Genesis through Deuteronomy is one long book, divided because it could not fit on a single scroll).

An addendum requires priests to wear special undergarments in order to prevent exposure at the altar, a capital offense (verses 42-43; cf. 20:26).



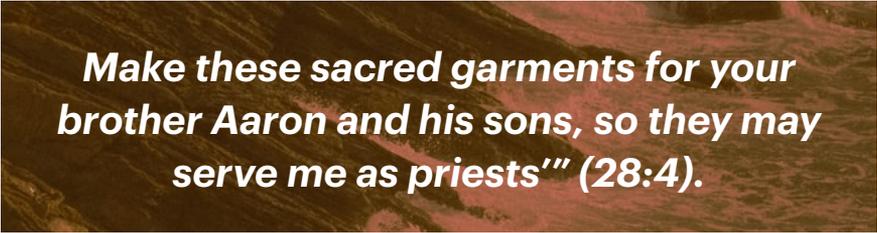
What God is saying to us. Should pastors still wear distinctive garments? How this passage applies today will vary by religious tradition, reflecting decisions on more fundamental issues. ‘High-church’ traditions, which endorse sacred buildings and sacred vocations, unsurprisingly tend toward special clergy vestments. ‘Low-church’ traditions, more skeptical of sacred buildings and a special class of clergy, trend toward pastors wearing routine clothing.

The New Testament likely does not definitively settle the issue. On the one hand, it offers no support for either sacred buildings or special clothing for Church leadership. On the other hand, it derives from the earliest decades of the Church, during its struggles for survival, during an era of house churches, and during the early days of self-definition.

Church historians tell us that when clerical vestments did arise, their design derived more from Greco-Roman formal attire, than from Old Testament directives. Lest the secular origin be deemed decisively disqualifying, we note that our culture also provides uniforms for various vocations. Some uniforms identify those authorized to perform government-controlled activities (e.g., soldiers, police, and fire services). Other uniforms distinguish service providers from customers (e.g., airline staff, mechanics, doctors, and nurses). So even though the New Testament never endorses the notion of ‘sacred’ garments, it does not necessarily prohibit clerical vestments as a cultural sign of organizational function.

Those who advocate vestments often make another argument: that it shifts focus from the individual to the office, from personality to function. Given the proliferation of celebrity pastors, anything that shifts focus to office over personality could arguably be a welcome modification, even if this was not its purpose in Exodus.

Ultimately, the decision on vestments generally comes down to the underlying issue: whether, in the New Testament era, clergy remains a distinct vocation, to which some are appointed, 'to serve God' in some distinctive sense (verses 1,4,41). For those traditions that affirm so, vestments remain a legitimate – not mandatory – indication of organizational role, and a marker of 'dignity and honor' (verses 2,40). For those traditions that affirm not, vestments generally have no role.



Make these sacred garments for your brother Aaron and his sons, so they may serve me as priests'" (28:4).

DAY 28

PRIESTS: CONSECRATION & ORDINATION

Exodus 29

With Aaron and his sons clothed in sacred garments, they are to be consecrated and ordained. The two activities are related, but distinct. Consecration refers to process for rendering something or someone sacred to God (e.g., first-born sons, 13:2; and, those preparing to meet God at Sinai, 19:10,14,22). Ordination inducts religious leaders into office. Thus, consecration prepares priests for ordination. Within this chapter, Aaron, his sons, sacrifices, the altar, and the tabernacle are all consecrated; only Aaron and his sons are ordained.

What God said to them. The various steps in the process of consecration and ordination structure this chapter. Verses 1-3 list the elements needed for the ritual: a young bull, two rams, as well as bread, cakes and wafers.

For the ritual itself, Aaron, and then his sons, are brought to the entrance of the tabernacle to be ritually washed, then clothed in sacred garments, and anointed with oil (verses 4-9).

Three sacrifices follow: first the bull, then the two rams in succession. In each case, Aaron and his sons lay their hands

on the animal's head. The animal is slaughtered at the entrance to the tabernacle. Its blood is then applied to various objects: the blood of the bull is applied to the horns and base of the altar; the blood of the first ram, to the sides of the altar; and, the blood of the second ram, to the right ears, thumbs, and big toes of the priests, to the sides of the altar, and to the priests' clothes.

The animals are disposed of variously. Some of the bull's innards are burned on the altar; the rest of the animal is burned outside the camp as a sin offering. The entire first ram is burned on the altar. With the second ram, portions are burned, along with loaf, cake and wafer, as a wave offering; the breast and one thigh are distributed to Aaron and his sons (verses 10-28). (The typology of these sacrifices receives fuller explanation in Leviticus.)

A brief digression assigns Aaron's sacred garments to his successors (verses 29-30).

The passage then return to the portions of sacrifice distributed to Aaron and his sons. They are to roast and eat the meat and bread within the tabernacle confines: sacred food consumed in a sacred space by sacred people. Leftovers must be burned, not reserved (verses 31-34).

The ordination process requires seven days. Each day a bull is to be slaughtered as a sin offering to make atonement for the altar and to consecrate it (verses 35-37).

In addition to such special-occasion sacrifices, every morning and evening a lamb is to be sacrificed in perpetuity, along with flour and wine, as a symbolic meal for God. Then God will meet with Moses and his successors in the tabernacle (verses 38-43).

The final verses of the chapter conclude the preceding four chapters: with tabernacle, altar, and priests all consecrated, God will dwell in the midst of Israel and be their God (verses 44-46).

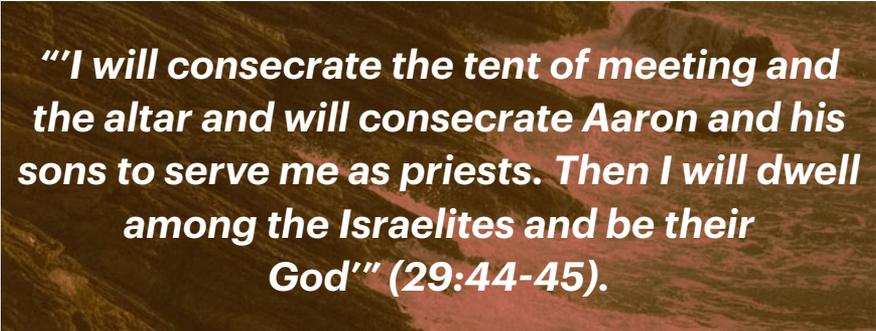


What God is saying to us. Like vestments, so with consecration and ordination, the contemporary application of these chapters will vary from one denomination and tradition to the next. The variation reflects an underlying question: Is there place in the New Testament era for vocational clergy? If so, then some process for consecration and ordination – for dedication and appointment to office – is appropriate, though it will necessarily differ from the sacrifices predominating here. The process is also a reminder to pastors of their calling: particularly the importance of personal sanctity (consecration); and, their dual responsibility toward God and his people (ordination).

On one point, all Christians agree: the superiority of Christ to all other priests or pastors, ancient or modern. The author of Hebrews notes that, unlike other priests, Jesus’ ministry is permanently and entirely effective:

Now there have been many of those priests, since death prevented them from continuing in office; but because Jesus lives forever, he has a permanent priesthood. Therefore he is able to save completely those who come to God through him, because he always lives to intercede for them... Such a high priest truly meets our need... Unlike the other high priests, he does not need to offer sacrifices day after day, first for his own sins, and then for the sins of the people. He sacrificed for their sins once for all when he offered himself (Hebrews 7:23-27).

Whether our tradition recognizes clergy or not, we all celebrate the ultimate high priest who sacrificed himself for sin, and intercedes for sinners.



“I will consecrate the tent of meeting and the altar and will consecrate Aaron and his sons to serve me as priests. Then I will dwell among the Israelites and be their God” (29:44-45).

DAY 29

TABERNACLE DETAILS

Exodus 30

This passage describes miscellaneous tabernacle features: the incense altar (verses 1-10); operational finances (verses 11-16); routine ceremonial washing (verses 17-21); anointing oil (verses 22-33); and, incense manufacture (verses 34-38).

What God said to them. The incense altar is square in shape, one-and-a-half feet per side, standing three feet high. Like the altar of burnt offering, it has horns on each corner. Like other tabernacle furnishings, it is made of wood, overlaid with gold, with gold rings and wooden poles for carrying. The incense altar stands in the Holy Place, just before the curtain to the Most Holy Place (verses 1-6).

The priest is to burn incense every morning and evening, coinciding with the animal sacrifice, and the extinguishing and lighting of the tabernacle lamps (cf. 29:38-41). The incense altar is to be used exclusively for this purpose, neither burning any other incense nor making any other type of offering. Once a year, on the Day of Atonement, the high priest is to sprinkle the altar with blood as a sin offering, to make atonement for it (verses 7-10 cf. Leviticus 16).

The upkeep of the tabernacle is financed with a tax on the populace on those occasions when a census is taken (for

example, in preparation for war). All adults – whether rich or poor – are to pay the same rate, a half shekel (roughly one-half ounce). Conceptually, payment of the tax ‘redeems’ the payee’s life; otherwise, the life belongs to God (cf. 13:11-15). Practically, the tax supports the costs of operating the tabernacle (verses 11-16).

Outside the tabernacle walls, within the courtyard, between the altar of burnt offering and the entrance to the tabernacle, stands a laver for ceremonial washing. Like other furniture in the public area, the basin is made of bronze. Before entering the tabernacle or presenting an offering at the altar, officiating priests are to wash their hands and feet; otherwise, they may die (verses 17-21).

The chapter closes with two recipes. The first is for a perfume. Used to anoint the tabernacle and all its furnishings and utensils, it consecrates them for use. The perfume is also used in consecrating the priests. The formulation is sacred: no one else may make or use it for any other purpose; if they do so, they are to be cast out of the community (verses 22-33).

The other recipe is for incense, to be burned on the incense altar, in the Holy Place. This recipe also is sacred. Anyone who duplicates it for other use is to be excommunicated (verses 34-38).

Throughout the entire chapter, one refrain occurs often: “The Lord said to Moses” (verses 11,17,22,34). Both the

equipment and the rituals to be used in worship must adhere strictly to divine specifications.



What God is saying to us. The information in this chapter is essential for running the tabernacle (and the temple which succeeds it), but is less compelling two millennia after these structures ceased operations. Nonetheless, this passage has some general relevance for Christians today.

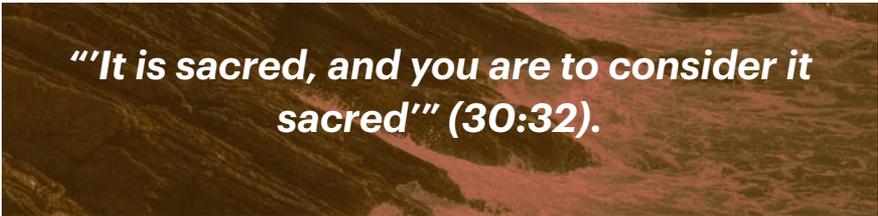
In part, the passage applies antithetically. The New Testament does not prescribe any of this equipment or ritual for Christian worship. Nor does it lay down comparable detail for any other sort of sacred equipment or rituals. The relative lack of directives permits us considerable latitude.

In some respects, freedom is an advantage: we can adopt and adapt practices that fit culturally, provided they do not violate Scripture. In some respects, however, it can also be a drawback: as we adopt cultural practices to reach our culture, we can inadvertently become so conformed to culture that we inadvertently violate biblical values and norms. Worship practices and equipment may carry intrinsic meaning or convey implicit messages; sometimes unintended or undesirable meanings and messages.

By way of illustration, questions might be raised about the increasing practice of constructing 'cafe' spaces for use during worship. Culturally, cafés are contexts for coffee and

snacks, relaxed venues for work and conversation. Is worship the sort of casual and consumer experience we expect from a coffee shop? Is God – or should a worship leader and preacher be – as focused on pleasing us as a barista is with customers? Perhaps not, since this passage threatens careless worship with death!

We want to worship and proclaim God in ways that resonate culturally. At the same time, we want to ensure that the means and fixtures we employ convey a biblical message and promote genuine worship. The lack of a rulebook does not mean that such details no longer matter. At the very least, prior to adopting extra-biblical worship practices and sanctuary designs, we should explore their cultural associations and inherent meanings to ensure that our worship honors God, both in intention and in execution.



DAY 30

SKILLED AND SPIRIT-FILLED CRAFTSMEN

Exodus 31

Beginning with chapter 25, God has set out the tabernacle requirements, including furnishings, tent, priestly attire, and equipment. Now he identifies a final component: the contractors to oversee construction (verses 1-11). An addendum repeats Sabbath regulations (verses 12-17). Then the extended section closes (verse 18).

What God said to them. Two characteristics of the lead contractors stand out. First, is their naming. Not their particular names, as we know little about them beyond what this passage states. Nor the meaning of their names, as the text does not indicate any special significance to either name. What is notable is that their personal names appear at all. Considering how few names are specified in this section of Exodus, the names that are provided signal the individual's importance. Moses is referenced by name; Aaron, too. Mostly, that is all. Until these two: Bezalel and Oholiab. This is the first indication of their importance, or the importance of their function.

The second sign of their importance – or the importance of their function – is the attention given to their qualifications. They excel in their vocations: the text commends their skill,

ability, and knowledge. They excel in the full range of construction specialties needed for the tabernacle project: design, metalwork, masonry, and woodwork. On top of this, God bestows his spirit on them. (At this point in salvation history, the role of the Spirit as third person of the Trinity was not yet known; the 'spirit' of God, like the 'spirit' of man, refers to his inner life-force, his energizing power.) So these contractors are both professionally skilled and spiritually endowed. God similarly gifts the remainder of the craftsmen with the necessary skills (verses 1-11).

Finally, as this extended section on the tabernacle comes to a close, God repeats the weekly Sabbath command. The exhortation is structured in a chiasm (a,b,b',a'): observe the Sabbath as a sign of covenant commitment (a,a'); those who violate the Sabbath by working are to be executed (b,b'). The exhortation largely repeats the fourth commandment, with the addition of the prescribed penalty for violations (verses 12-17 cf. 20:8-11).

In short, the tabernacle and its furnishings are sacred (chapters 25-27); the vestments and ministry of the priests are sacred (chapters 28-29); the accoutrements used in worship are sacred (chapter 30); the work of the craftsmen is sacred (chapter 30a); and, the Sabbath is sacred (chapter 30b).

Forming a frame around the extended passage, God inscribes these directives on tablets of stone (31:18 cf. 24:12). Having rescued Israel, he sets out his expectations for Israel's reciprocation.

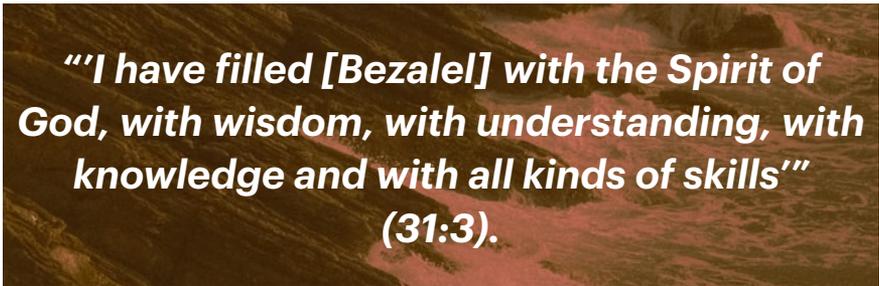


What God is saying to us. When discussing the application of Exodus 28-29, we noted that some Christian traditions oppose the designation of a distinct clergy vocation. Rather than deflating the status of clergy, however, this chapter encourages us to inflate the status of other vocations. Four figures are named in these chapters: Moses, Aaron, Bezalel, and Oholiab. The latter two find themselves in prestigious company. The ministry of the tabernacle would not be possible without both vocational clergy and vocational craftsmen. The appointment and spirit-filling of craftsmen indicate that God values a range of vocations, insofar as these skills are used in his worship and service.

The other point to be drawn from the first portion of this passage is the correlation between vocational excellence and spiritual empowerment. The connection is multi-faceted. The skills of these craftsmen derive from God, as well as from long practice and hard work. At the same time, their skills are heightened by the bestowal of divine spirit/Spirit. The work of God deserves both: not just technical skill, but also spiritual integrity; and, not just spiritual integrity, but also technical skill. To offer just one concrete example, worship teams that recruit non-believers for their musical skill, like worship teams that accept low standard in musicians because they are sincere Christians, might both reconsider their strategies.

As for the remainder of the chapter, the admonition to refrain from work on the Sabbath deserves serious

consideration today, even if the New Testament does not explicitly reaffirm it as an absolute obligation. A special building for worship, a special liturgy for worship, and a special clergy to lead worship are of little point, if God's people do not reserve time, and take the effort, to participate in collective worship. As our culture drifts from its historic moorings, Sundays are increasingly used as free days for scheduling activities which cannot fit into the work week, including shopping, dining out, sports events, and children's extracurricular activities. Faithful participation in corporate worship increasingly requires Christians to prioritize that over other activities.



DAY 31

COVENANT VIOLATED AND REVOKED

Exodus 32

The last seven chapters have provided detailed specifications for the tabernacle so that God can dwell in the midst of Israel (chapters 25-31). After the current incident, six more chapters record the precise implementation of those requirements (chapters 35-40). Chapters 32-34 interrupt both thematically and spiritually: between planning and constructing a residence for God, Israel commits idolatry.

What God said to them. The incident divides into basically two parts. Verses 1-10 set out the prompting occasion: Israel commits idolatry (verses 1-6), and God tells Moses of his intention to destroy the nation (verses 7-10). The bulk of the passage reports Moses' intervention with all parties, laid out in a chiasm:

a	vv11-14	Moses intercedes with God: 'Do not destroy Israel!'
b	vv15-20	Moses intervenes with Israel, demolishing the idol.
c	vv21-24	Moses rebukes Aaron for leading Israel into sin.
b'	vv25-29	Moses intervenes with Israel, killing the miscreants.
a'	vv30-35	Moses intercedes with God: 'Forgive the sinners!'

Overall, the passage provides a case study in the limits of divine forgiveness.

While Moses is on Mount Sinai receiving blueprints for building the tabernacle, Israel grows insecure. In the absence of their primary conduit to God, they request Aaron to make them an idol. He complies, casting a calf of gold. The people embrace the object: “These are your gods, Israel, who ‘brought you up out of Egypt’.” Responding to their enthusiasm, Aaron incorporates the idol into the worship of Yahweh, building an altar, declaring a religious festival, offering sacrifice, and sharing a raucous meal (verses 16).

God’s response is immediate and severe. He disowns them: they are ‘Moses’ people’, whom ‘Moses brought up out of Egypt’. God’s ‘anger burns’ against them: he will destroy them all, and start over with Moses’ lineage (verses 710).

Moses uses God’s own language, appealing to him to ‘relent from the disaster’: “Why should your ‘anger burn’ against ‘your people’, whom ‘you delivered from Egypt’”. He points to the negative impact on God’s reputation, and to his previous promises to the patriarchs. Moses’ appeal is effective: God ‘relents from the disaster’ (verses 11-14).

Then Moses descends the mountain to deal with the idolaters. He breaks the tablets written by God, thus revoking the covenant offer. He destroys the idol three times over: by fire, by pulverizing, and by sprinkling the

powder on water and having the people drink it (verses 15-20).

In the middle of the narrative – the place of emphasis – Moses rebukes Aaron for leading the people in such grave sin. Like Adam and Eve in Eden, Aaron deflects responsibility, blaming the people for initiating, Moses for his absence, and the idol for sculpting itself (verses 21-24).

The narrative then returns to the people. Moses calls for the execution of those still running amok. Levites, his own clan, respond, striking down three thousand miscreants. In response to their devotion, the clan is appointed to an hereditary priesthood (verses 25-29).

Finally, Moses turns back to God, appealing for him to forgive this sin, even at risk of his own salvation. This time, his appeal is unsuccessful. Those who committed idolatry will die by plague. God, though, does not rescind his promise to the nation: he will still lead them into Canaan (verses 30-35).

Golden calf, burnt and fellowship offerings, sacred meal, wild partying: the Israelites combine Egyptian and Canaanite practices with the worship of Yahweh. The quick descent into syncretism demonstrates the fickleness of human commitment. Its timing – after only forty days without Moses – speaks to the faithlessness of human character. Its placement – between tabernacle planning and construction – reveals the inconstancy of human devotion.

The tablets are smashed nearly as soon as written: how can this covenant relationship survive?



What God is saying to us. We need not puzzle over how this text relates to Christians, because the apostle Paul explicitly applies it in 1 Corinthians: “Do not be idolaters, as some of them were; as it is written: ‘The people sat down to eat and drink and got up to indulge in revelry’” (1 Corinthians 10:7, quoting Exodus 32:6). The details of the Corinthian situation are too complicated to explore fully here; two observations suffice.

In one sense, though Moses offered his life to atone for Israel, God declined and killed the guilty. When Jesus, on the other hand, offered his life to atone for sin, God accepted, and gives life to the guilty. We rightly celebrate his salvation.

That noted, Paul nonetheless warns Christians – twice! – that, “these things occurred as examples to keep us from setting our hearts on evil things as they did” (10:6,11). His point is clear: avoid their sins, or face the same consequences!

“The Lord replied to Moses, ‘Whoever has sinned against me I will blot out of my book’” (32:33).

A graphic featuring a background of a desert landscape with a large rock formation. The text is overlaid in a white, serif font with a slight shadow effect.

DAY 32

HOW CLOSE IS TOO CLOSE?

Exodus 33

Yesterday's passage ended with God telling Moses to resume the journey toward Canaan, promising that an angel would lead the way. Previously, that promise seemed to be an unqualified good (cf. 23:20-23). Here, however, the angel leads so that God can keep distance, lest Israel's sin provoke him to destroy them. Half the theme of this chapter is Moses renegotiating God's plan to distance himself from his people.

Interwoven with that negotiation, Moses seeks closer proximity to God for himself. The chapter explores the contrast: the threat of increased distance between God and Israel, due to their sin; alongside Moses' effort to leverage God's pleasure with him for closer proximity to him.

The chapter alternates back and forth between the two themes, resulting in synonymous parallelism (a,b,a',b'):

a	33:1-6	God will not lead Israel to Canaan, due to their sin.
b	33:7-11	God currently speaks with Moses face to face.
a'	33:12-17	God will lead Israel to Canaan, at Moses' plea.
b'	33:18-23	God allows Moses to see his back, but not his face.

The first and third parts highlight the distance between God

and the people due to their sin; the second and fourth, Moses' proximity to God, arising from divine approval. Key words accentuate the contrast: God threatens to 'destroy' Israel; Moses wants to see God's 'face'.

What God said to them. In the aftermath of the golden-calf incident, Moses persuaded God not to 'destroy' Israel (32:10). But their rebelliousness poses continued danger. Recognizing the risk, God proposes not to lead them on the journey to Canaan lest they rebel and he 'destroy' them (verses 1-6). In that case, the tabernacle is unnecessary.

Moses, in contrast, has unique access to God, via a small tent that prefigures the tabernacle. He sets it up outside the camp, and only he can enter. The pillar of cloud descends on the tent, and while the rest of the people keep their distance, the Lord speaks with Moses 'face to face', as to a friend (verses 7-11).

Resuming the former theme, Moses appeals to God to rescind his decision not to lead Israel on the journey to Canaan. Verses 12-17 are particularly packed, beginning with its chiasmic structure. Moses appeals to his standing as 'known by name' and 'favored' with God (verses 12,17). On this basis, he coaxes God to stay engaged with 'your people' (verses 13,16). God acquiesces, agreeing that his 'Presence' (literally, his 'face') will travel with his people to Canaan (verses 14,15).

'Face' provides a segue to the final appeal. Having secured God's continued presence ('face') with Israel, Moses seeks

closer access for himself. Thus far, God has spoken to him 'face to face'. Now he asks to see God's glory. God grants the request in part, but not in full. God's goodness (or splendor) will pass before him. God's name, Yahweh, will be proclaimed in his presence. God's essence as merciful and compassionate will be disclosed. But Moses cannot see God's 'face', for no one can see God and survive. God provides him double protection: he places Moses in the cleft of a rock, and covers him with his hand, until his glory has passed by, so that Moses sees his back, but not his 'face' (verses 18-23).

Altogether, then, the chapter addresses the question, "To what degree can human beings approach the holy God?" The answer varies. God will dwell in the midst of his rebellious people, but they must remain at a distance, lest they sin and he destroy them: thus, the tabernacle. Moses, though, has closer access: he hears God speak, encounters God's splendor, hears his name and essence, and can view God from behind. But not even Moses, though known and favored by God, can look directly at God's face.



What God is saying to us. The Gospel of John reflects on this passage, introducing Jesus by contrast with Moses. Jesus has greater access to God than Moses ever had, and reveals him to us more fully: "No one has ever seen God, but the one and only Son, who is himself God and is in closest relationship with the Father, has made him known" (John 1:18). In Jesus, we see the glory of God: "The

Word became flesh and made his dwelling [literally, 'tabernacled'] among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the one and only Son, who came from the Father" (John 1:14). Through Jesus, we also know God's character, more clearly than Moses did: "The Law was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ" (John 1:17). To see God, we look at him revealed in the life and teaching of Jesus.



You cannot see my face, for no one may see me and live" (33:20).

DAY 33

THE COVENANT RESTORED

Exodus 34

In response to Moses' intercession, God agrees to restore the covenant. The restoration parallels the original covenant both in setting and in content.

In setting, Moses prepares to meet God in the morning (34:2,4; cf. 19:11,15). He ascends alone to the top of Mount Sinai (34:2-4 cf. 19:20-24). The Lord descends to meet him (34:5 cf. 19:18-20).

The content of the restored covenant also remains largely the same:

- preamble: God's self-description (34:5-7 cf. 20:2);
- sanctions: blessings/curses (34:10-11 cf. 23:20-31);
- stipulations: required reciprocations (34:12-26 cf. 20:3-23:33);
- ratification (omitted here; cf. 24:1-8);
- recording of covenant (34:27 cf. 24:4).

Along with the similar setting and content, details are significantly updated, reflecting recent events.

What God said to them. At God's command, Moses collects two stone tablets to replace those he broke, and climbs Mount Sinai. No one else may approach (not even Aaron,

given his role in the golden-calf incident). God will again inscribe the covenant (verses 1-4).

In the aftermath of Israel's covenant violation, when God self-identifies, he accentuates his 'softer' traits, evident in the restoration: "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." Nevertheless, he has not become an indulgent sentimentalist; he still punishes egregious sin (verses 5-7).

Moses intercedes for Israel, appealing for God to accompany Israel to Canaan, forgive their sin, and claim them as his own (verses 8-9). God's response forms the core of the covenant. He commits to blessing Israel in unprecedented ways, particularly, by driving out the current inhabitants of Canaan (verses 10-11).

Because Israel has just engaged in an idolatrous festival, and will face ongoing temptation from Canaanite practices, this list of covenant stipulations differentiates illegitimate from legitimate worship practices (verses 12-17 cf. verses 18-26). The requirements also skim the surface of the earlier stipulations, touching down here and there on representative regulations from chapters 20-23.

The covenant renewal concludes with God (or perhaps with Moses, it is unclear) recording the document for posterity (verses 27-28).

As Moses descends Mount Sinai, his face glows. (This should be read against the backdrop of yesterday's passage, and Moses' request to see the 'face' and 'glory' of God.) His luminous appearance unsettles the people: they are now afraid to approach him, as they previously feared to approach God (cf. 20:18-21). So Moses wears a veil whenever he speaks with the people, unmasking only when he meets with God (verses 29-35).

Thus, the main themes of the covenant renewal are the mercy of God, and the glory that transforms Moses. The covenant is gracious and glorious.

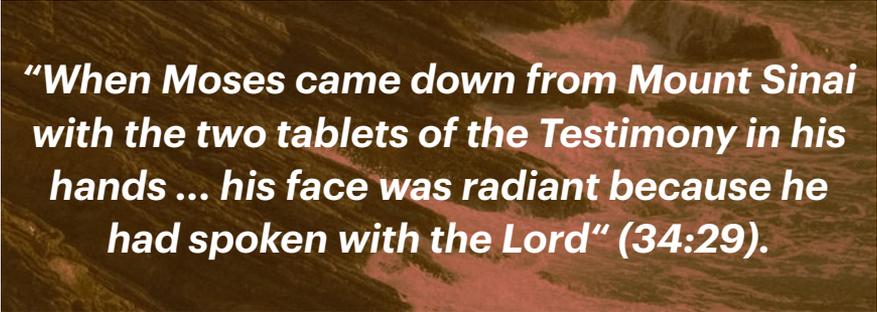


What God is saying to us. The grace and glory of the Exodus covenant, and the threat against violations, both explain why the earliest Christians were reluctant to part with it. Instead, those from a Jewish background expected gentile converts to submit to both Christ and the Law. In opposition, the apostle Paul cites the epilogue of this passage to insist that the Law should not be imposed on gentiles. He develops three arguments in 2 Corinthians 3.

First, the New Covenant is immeasurably more glorious than its predecessor. The Old Covenant was carved in stone; the New is empowered by the Spirit. The former brought the immediate condemnation of 3,000, with many more judgments to follow; the latter brings acquittal. The earlier was in force for a fixed period, now ended; the later lasts forever (2 Corinthians 3:7-11).

Secondly, when hearers reject gospel preaching, this is not evidence of its inadequacy, but of their own obtuseness. Moses' peers could not bear to see the glory of God, even indirectly as it reflected in his face, so he wore a veil. Similarly, when unbelievers cannot see the glory of God in the gospel Paul preaches, it is because a comparable veil covers their eyes. Though, as Christians can attest from personal experience, when anyone turns to Christ, the Spirit removes that veil. Then we, like Moses in the tent of meeting, stand with face uncovered and see the glory of Christ. As a result, our lives, like Moses' face, are transformed (2 Corinthians 3:12-18).

Consequently, we, like Paul, must resist any pressure to modify the gospel message in the hopes of winning more converts. It is glorious as is. Those who resist the message do so not due to any deficiency in the gospel, but due to a deficiency in themselves. Nothing is gained, and much is lost, in attempts to 'improve' the message in order to make it more effective.



“When Moses came down from Mount Sinai with the two tablets of the Testimony in his hands ... his face was radiant because he had spoken with the Lord” (34:29).

DAY 34

BUILDING WITH ENTHUSIASM

Exodus 35:1-36:7

After the interlude regarding Israel's defection, the narrator signals that he is returning to the main storyline: chapter 31 ended on the obligation to keep the Sabbath; chapter 35 begins on the same note. (In fact, 35:2 comes almost verbatim from 31:15.) The reference to the Sabbath bridges the gap, then the narrator resumes the main theme. Chapters 25-31 supply the blueprints for the tabernacle; chapters 35-40 report its construction.

What God said to them. *In preparation for construction, Moses solicits two sorts of contributions: materials and skilled labor. Parallelism structures this section:*

a	35:4-9	Moses calls for donation of raw materials, cf. 25:1-9;
b	35:10-19	Moses calls for donation of skilled labor, cf. 31:1-11;
a'	35:20-29	The people donate raw materials, cf. 25:1-9;
b'	35:30-36:1	Bezalel and Oholiab oversee the skilled labor, cf. 31:1-11;
c	36:2-5	Donations of raw materials exceed the need, cf. 30:11-16;
c'	36:6-7	Moses calls for donations to cease.

Thematically, the section highlights the extraordinary level of participation in the construction project.

Moses solicits materials of all sorts: precious metals, fabrics, animal skins, wood, fuel, fragrances, and precious stones, from 'everyone who is willing' (35:4-9). He also appeals for labor from 'all who are skilled' in tentmaking, woodworking, leatherwork, metalwork, masonry, tapestry, and so forth (35:10-19).

In response, 'everyone who was willing' donated the requested materials: precious metals, fabrics, animals skins, wood, precious stones, fuel, and fragrances (35:20-29). They also get to work: with Bezalel supervising, and Oholiab training, 'every skilled person' constructed the tabernacle and its equipment (35:30-36:1).

The narrator underscores four aspects of the response. First, participation is voluntary, not coerced: 'everyone who was willing, and whose heart moved them', 'all who were willing, men and women alike', 'all the Israelite men and women who were willing'. Secondly, participation is universal: 'they all', 'everyone who had', and, 'everyone who had'. Thirdly, willingness is not enough; competence and divine enablement are also necessary: 'every skilled woman', 'all the women who were willing and had the skill', and, 'every skilled person to whom the Lord has given skill and ability'. Fourthly, the donations and service are motivated by devotion to the Lord: 'an offering to the Lord', 'a wave offering to the Lord', 'an offering to the Lord', 'freewill offerings for the work of the Lord'. Donations are generous and widespread; craftsmanship is competent; and, they do it all for God (35:20-36:1).

The conclusion underscores the eagerness of the response to the building project: the people donate so much that the project supervisors appeal to Moses to discourage further donations (36:2-7).



What God is saying to us. This passage begs for application to church building programs today: the people donated materials and skilled labor; they gave so much, the management team was overwhelmed and pleaded with them to stop! It all seems too good to be true.

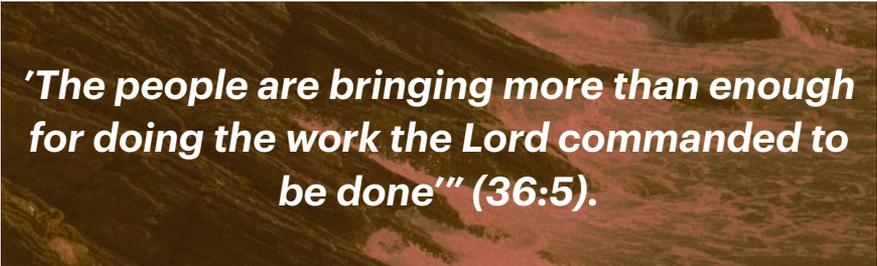
For us, it is. At least two discontinuities impede our use of this passage for building projects today. For one, Moses had an explicit, direct command from God to build, including blueprints and production details. Few are so bold to claim this level of authorization today (and experience indicates that any such claims should be viewed with a healthy dose of skepticism). For the other, this was the sole sacred building within national Israel. Our building projects tend to add yet more program space, often in regions already crowded with church facilities. Appeal to this passage in support of a building project today requires a level of authorization and a degree of need which rarely – if ever – exist.

Is the passage, then, irrelevant to us? No, because the New Testament applies the substance of this passage, if not all its details, in other contexts. In 1 Corinthians, church members self-differentiate into two groups : the

exceptionally gifted and the inconsequential. Paul insists, to the contrary, that everyone is gifted by the same Spirit, and so has some God-appointed – and equally valuable – role to play in the building-up of the church community (1 Corinthians 12:4-13).

Then, in 2 Corinthians, Paul faces the challenge of raising funds from the impoverished Corinthians for the relief of the famine-stricken church in Jerusalem, a thousand miles away. His appeal shares several features in common with this passage, particularly the encouragement of generous giving, first to God and then to others (2 Corinthians 8:1-12).

These chapters may not justify the construction of church facilities today, but they do encourage all Christians to participate enthusiastically and generously in the work of God and in the ministry of the Church.



'The people are bringing more than enough for doing the work the Lord commanded to be done'" (36:5).

DAY 35

'AS THE LORD COMMANDED'

Exodus 36:8-39:43

The contents of chapters 36-39 match chapters 25-31 remarkably closely. Both describe the tabernacle, including virtually all the same items, in much the same language, albeit with some variation in order:

- 36:8-38 construction of the tabernacle structure, cf. 26:1-37;
- 37:1-9 construction of the ark and atonement cover, cf. 25:10-22;
- 37:10-16 construction of the table, cf. 25:23-30;
- 37:17-24 construction of the lampstand, cf. 25:31-40;
- 37:25-28 construction of the incense altar, cf. 30:1-10;
- 37:29 preparation of the anointing oil and incense, cf. 30:22-33,34-38;
- 38:1-7 construction of the altar for burnt offerings, cf. 27:1-8;
- 38:8 construction of the wash basin, cf. 30:17-21;
- 38:9-20 construction of the courtyard, cf. 27:9-19;
- 38:21-29 inventory of metals used;
- 39:1-31 construction of the priestly vestments, cf. 28:1-43;
- 39:32-43 conclusion: Moses inspects the work.

The extensive parallels highlight the point of chapters 36-40.

What God said to them. When God offered to live in the midst of Israel, he laid down a stipulation: “Have them make a sanctuary for me... Make this tabernacle and all its furnishings exactly like the pattern I will show you” (25:8).

Chapters 25-31 set out the pattern. Chapters 36-39 record the craftsmen following the pattern exactly. The narrator does not leave the point implicit, to be inferred from extensive repetition. He also adds an explicit summary statement, not just once, but a full eighteen times:

- ‘as the Lord commanded Moses’ (39:1);
- ‘as the Lord commanded Moses’ (39:5);
- ‘as the Lord commanded Moses’ (39:7);
- ‘as the Lord commanded Moses’ (39:21);
- ‘as the Lord commanded Moses’ (39:26);
- ‘as the Lord commanded Moses’ (39:29);
- ‘as the Lord commanded Moses’ (39:31);
- ‘as the Lord commanded Moses’ (39:32);
- ‘as the Lord commanded Moses’ (39:42);
- ‘as the Lord commanded Moses’ (39:43);
- ‘as the Lord commanded Moses’ (40:16);
- ‘as the Lord commanded him’ (40:19);
- ‘as the Lord commanded him’ (40:21);
- ‘as the Lord commanded him’ (40:23);
- ‘as the Lord commanded him’ (40:25);
- ‘as the Lord commanded him’ (40:27);

- ‘as the Lord commanded him’ (40:29);
- ‘as the Lord commanded Moses’ (40:32).

Everything that God commands in chapters 25-31, they do in chapters 36-40, and just the way that he says to do it.

Why does the narrator make this point so insistently? For the first time, God is setting up a single venue for worship, under centralized leadership, regulating permitted practices. Doing so delegitimizes all other ways that people previously worshipped him, or might worship him in future. Throughout much of its history, Israel will chaff under these restrictions, especially once the nation splits, and the northern faction creates its own worship facility, and again when the exiles return and rebuild the Jerusalem temple without permitting the local populace to participate. Imposing uniformity in worship – in location, leadership and liturgy – requires vigorous justification to overcome persistent resistance.

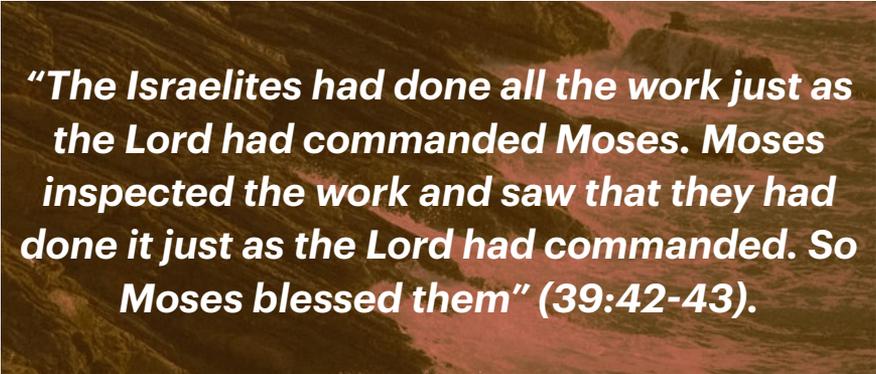


What God is saying to us. The New Testament does not legislate a specific blueprint for our buildings, a single liturgy for our worship, or a centralized hierarchy for our leadership. At the same time, it does reflect a consensual core, establishing parameters for faith, worship, and lifestyle. Uniformity is not required, but some consistency is.

In our era, the pendulum has swung from centralized location, liturgy, and leadership, toward free-market,

entrepreneurial creativity, in which mostly anyone with a dynamic stage-presence can start a new church network , holding to pretty much any theology, engaging in largely whatever practices they choose, with little oversight, whether spiritual, financial, or legal. A single universal uniform model of Christianity is neither achievable, nor desirable. At the same time, unless we fit within the parameters of the historic consensus – what the Church has always believed and practiced, at all times, and in all places – it is a stretch to claim the label ‘Christian’.

Total continuity with Christian tradition leads to rigidity and cultural dislocation. The absence of continuity with historic Christian practice promotes cultural conformity and apostasy.



“The Israelites had done all the work just as the Lord had commanded Moses. Moses inspected the work and saw that they had done it just as the Lord had commanded. So Moses blessed them” (39:42-43).

DAY 36

THE GLORY OF GOD FILLS THE TABERNACLE

Exodus 40

By the end of chapter 39, the Israelites have completed the tabernacle components. Now they assemble the pieces.

What God said to them. God schedules assembly for the first day of the first month (nearly a year after leaving Egypt, and nine months after arriving at Sinai). Because this event is pivotal to the founding of the nation, it will mark the beginning of each new year (40:1-2).

The narrative takes the reader through each part of the tabernacle, twice. The first time through, God lists each part of the facility that they are to set up. The second time, Moses sets up each part 'just as the Lord commanded him'. Since these are the third and fourth surveys of the tabernacle, the pace is brisker.

First, God directs them to erect the tent. Then they are to place the ark in the Most Holy Place. Following this, they are to fill the Holy Place with the table, lampstand, incense altar, and doorway curtain. Next, they are to outfit the courtyard with the altar of burnt offering and basin. Finally, they are to enclose the tabernacle compound (40:2-8).

The tabernacle is to be consecrated before its first use. This involves anointing the tent and all its furnishings, then the courtyard and all its equipment (40:9-11).

Finally, Aaron and his sons are to be consecrated. As previously stipulated, this entails ceremonial washing, sacred vestments, and anointing with oil (40:12-15; cf. chapter 29).

Moses completes all these tasks 'just as the Lord commanded him' (40:16). He sets up the tabernacle, with its bases, frames, crossbars, posts, tent, and roof, 'as the Lord commanded him' (40:17-19). He places the covenant tablets in the ark, installs the cover, and carries it into the Most Holy Place, 'as the Lord commanded him' (40:20-21). He sets up the table, with bread, in the Holy Place, 'as the Lord commanded him' (40:22-23). Then the lampstand with lamps, 'as the Lord commanded him' (40:24-25); and, the incense altar, 'as the Lord commanded him' (40:26-27).

Next, he closes off the Holy Place with a curtain, and sets up the altar of burnt offering in the courtyard, making burnt and grain offerings, 'as the Lord commanded him' (40:28-29). He places the wash basin in the courtyard, 'as the Lord commanded Moses' (40:30-32). Finally, he hangs the exterior curtains, demarcating the tabernacle compound (40:33).

With his requirements fully met, God takes up residence in the tabernacle. Initially, the glory of the Lord so fills the sanctuary that Moses cannot enter. The divine presence

guides Israel in their journeys through the wilderness: when the cloud lifts, they follow it; when the cloud settles, they pause. For the duration of their wilderness sojourn, the Lord dwells visibly in the midst of his people: the cloud rests over the tabernacle by day; and fire, by night (40:34-38).

An anti-imperial polemic underlies the entire book. Exodus begins with enslaved Israel building cities for Pharaoh; it ends with liberated Israel building a residence for God. God is true emperor, not Pharaoh. No empire can long oppress his people; he will free them, and they will serve their true Sovereign in gratitude.



What God is saying to us. In the survey of Exodus 25-40 on Day 22, we saw that the Gospel of John links the presence of God in the tabernacle with his presence in Jesus: “The Word became flesh and ‘tabernacled’ among us” (John 1:14a). Similarly, here, the glory of God indwelling the tabernacle anticipates its presence in Jesus: “We have seen his glory, the glory of the one and only Son, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth” (John 1:14b). Jesus fulfills what the tabernacle represented: the presence and glory of God.

At the same time, Jesus transforms the glory of God. In the tabernacle, glory represented the overpowering effulgence of the transcendent God. This is the glory that Jesus shared in his pre-incarnate state (John 17:5), and reclaims after his exaltation (John 17:24). During his incarnation, however, his

glory manifests not in grandeur, but in crucifixion: “The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified.” He elaborates: “Unless a kernel of wheat falls to the ground and dies, it remains only a single seed. But if it dies, it produces many seeds” (John 12:23-24). Instead of preserving his life, he resolutely faces his execution: “Father, glorify your name!” The Father answers from heaven, “I have glorified it, and will glorify it again” (John 12:27-28).

The glory that once prevented Moses from entering the tabernacle now opens salvation to all through the atoning death of Jesus on the cross.

