

Book of Exodus, Session 1

Introduction

The Book of Exodus is the second book of the Torah or Pentateuch, the first five books of the Old Testament. It takes the story of the Israelites from their presence in and oppression by Egypt up to the reception of the divine law that occupies the entire book of Leviticus and much of Numbers. It contains many of the central moments of the early history of Israel, both narratively and theologically: Egyptian bondage, the ten plagues, the Passover, the Exodus from Egypt proper, the crossing of the sea, the divine revelation and law-giving at Sinai, and the apostasy of the golden calf.

Exodus and the Patriarchs

In terms of the overarching plot of the Pentateuch, the book of Exodus is the continuation of the story of the patriarchs and Joseph recounted in Genesis. This is clear from its opening lines: the enumeration of Jacob's sons who went down to Egypt, the notice of their deaths, and the statement that a new king arose who did not know Joseph—that lack of knowledge forming the background for the oppression that will immediately follow.

Despite these links between the patriarchal (Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob in Genesis) era and that of the exodus, there is good reason to think that the stories of the patriarchs and that of the exodus were originally distinct, at least at an oral level, before they were combined into the familiar progression that we now see before us. The patriarchs and the exodus (including its conclusion in the conquest under Joshua) represent two different concepts of Israel's claim to the land of Canaan and their relationship to their god. The patriarchs move through the land, building altars, settling in various towns, and burying their dead. It is reasonable to suppose that

there was an indigenous tradition among early Israelites that this was how they came to occupy the land, centered around God's promise of that land to their ancestors. With the beginning of the exodus story, however, all of the work the patriarchs did to lay claim to Canaan is instantly undone; for all intents and purposes, they might as well have gone to Egypt right away, rather than wandering around Canaan for three generations. The exodus tradition seems to have at its center the notion that it is God's rescue of the Israelites from Egypt that constitutes the foundation of their relationship: "I will take you to be my people, and I will be your God" (Exod 6:7). It is likely that an independent exodus story was brought to Israel at an early stage and was incorporated as the continuation of the indigenous tradition of the patriarchs.

It is this supposition that gives us entry into the question of the historicity of the Exodus story. Archaeological and comparative studies have all but ruled out the possibility of a truly national exodus as described in the Bible. There is no Egyptian notice of the enslavement of an entire foreign population, nor of their departure, nor of a series of miraculous plagues; there is not a single archaeological find in the Sinai desert that would indicate the journeys of a substantial number of people, much less the two million or so that the biblical account says made the trip; nor is there evidence for a conquest of Canaan by incoming Israelites as the book of Joshua describes. There is reason to think that the entire story is not a complete invention, however. Perhaps the foremost argument in that regard is: what people, given the opportunity to create from whole cloth the story of their origins, would choose to start off as slaves in a foreign country? This is known as the criterion of embarrassment: it is hard to imagine anyone telling this story unless it had a grain of truth to it, a grain that could not be avoided. Thus it is important that although the grand biblical account may not be substantiated by scholarly investigations, what we do have evidence for is the enslavement in Egypt of some Semitic peoples, in small

numbers, at various times in Egyptian history. We also have Egyptian documents that describe some of those slaves escaping (though no more than a handful at a time). The most we can say with any measure of probability about the historicity of the exodus is that some Semitic bands may have left a situation of enslavement in Egypt and made their way through the desert into Canaan, where they joined up with the emerging Israelite population in the hill country. It is not the biblical exodus; but over a few generations of integration and oral tradition, it is not difficult to see how the story could have grown from its humble roots into the sweeping epic we have before us. It is the story that, as readers of the Bible, we are interested in anyway; we should favor story, and the meanings that have been and are attached to it, over the mere events of history, which are devoid of inherent meaning until they are put into narrative form.

The sources in Exodus

Despite its independent origins, the exodus story is very much integrated into the complete pentateuchal narrative that runs from Genesis through Deuteronomy. In fact, it is incorporated three distinct times, for the book of Exodus is not a unified composition by a single hand. It is, rather, like the other books of the Pentateuch, a combination of three originally independent documents, three separate narratives of Israel's early history, each with its own theological perspective, literary style, and, most importantly, narrative claims about what exactly happened to the Israelites at each stage of their story. Scholars call these narratives the Yahwist (known for short as J, from the German spelling "Jahwist"), named as such because this document claims that the divine name Yahweh was known to Israel since the beginning of time; the Elohist (known as E), which claims that the divine name was revealed first only in the time of Moses, and therefore uses the designation "Elohim" for God up until that revelation in Exodus

3; and the Priestly document (known as P), whose distinctly priestly perspective is evident throughout, and nowhere more clearly than in the book of Leviticus, which is attributed entirely to that source.

The presence of multiple authors in the book of Exodus is evident on multiple levels throughout the book. The divine name is revealed to Moses twice, in Exodus 3 and 6, in each case, it would seem, for the first time. These two revelations belong to E and P, respectively. (J, as mentioned above, needs no new revelation, as people have known Yahweh's name since the beginning of Genesis.) The sources differ on what happened at the mountain in the wilderness, and even on the name of the mountain: for J and P, it is called Sinai; for E, it is called Horeb. According to E, the Ten Commandments and the laws of Exodus 21–23 were given there, sealed by a covenant ceremony; according to P, the instructions for the building of the Tabernacle were given on the mountain (and the laws of Leviticus and Numbers were given from the Tabernacle itself after it was constructed); according to J, no laws were given in the wilderness at all, but rather a covenant was made between God and Israel regarding the conquest of the land and the worship of foreign deities.

More minor discrepancies emerge elsewhere. What was the name of Moses's father-in-law? How are Moses and Aaron (and Miriam) related? What happened at the escape from the Egyptians by the sea? How many times did Moses go up the mountain in the wilderness? What is that mountain called? What and where is the Tent of Meeting? And so on. These three documents J, E, and P were combined together into the Pentateuch basically as we now have it sometime in the Persian period. Because the person who interwove them into a continuous narrative took great care to preserve as much of each of his sources as possible, we are still able to isolate them and describe their individual characteristics. It is their differences that explain

most of the difficulties we encounter when reading the book of Exodus as a whole: the contradictions, repetitions, and other narrative discontinuities that occur regularly throughout.

For the contemporary reader of the Old Testament, it is of course the final canonical form of the text that must be wrestled with. Yet the final form could not exist without the three documents that it comprises. The aim of identifying its source documents is not mere historical curiosity, but rather a deeper understanding of why the book looks the way that it does. These three authors, or perhaps better schools of authors, contributed the narrative and theological building blocks for the text that became scripture. There is inherent value in recognizing that in ancient Israel, in the context from which the Old Testament emerged, there were multiple understandings of Israel's history and theology—sometimes conflicting, sometimes complementary, but in any case different—and that the book of Exodus preserves them in tandem. There is no preference shown to one viewpoint over another, as each is equally present in the text, even when their most significant theological statements are deeply at odds with each other. There is virtually no attempt to impose a coherent theological perspective on the whole, nor any attempt to align the claims of the various authors into some single overarching concept. Each ancient voice has its own independent value. The book of Exodus is a repository for (some of) the diverse worldviews present in ancient Israel.

It is crucial to understand that, given this situation, the canonical story that we are most familiar with was not actually written by any individual. Some aspects of the story were told by all: the existence of Moses, the presence of the Israelites in Egypt, their departure, their journey to a mountain in the wilderness where something special happened. But the details differ widely, and sometimes in ways that may seem almost unthinkable to those who know only the canonical text. For instance, the burning bush is known to only the J document. No author ever thought

there were ten plagues: P has seven plagues, J has six, and E has none. In J the Israelites escape hastily at night, giving us the tradition of unleavened bread; in P they walk out boldly during the day. E has no notion of manna. The Ten Commandments, the tablets, and the golden calf are completely unknown to J and P. The crossing of the sea is unknown to E. The Tent of Meeting is known only to E and P. There is no ark in E. There is no Joshua in J. Miriam is only in E.

The contradictions that were created when these stories were put together have been a fount of interpretation from the earliest post-biblical period to the present. Whether or not, like the rabbis of the first millennium CE, one holds firmly to the notion of Mosaic authorship (a claim that is not made in the book of Exodus, nor anywhere in the Pentateuch itself), the interactions between the source documents provide us with almost unlimited opportunity for exegesis. We grapple with the same questions that motivated the earliest readers of the text.

As part of the Pentateuch, and, in its components, parts of three originally continuous documents stretching beyond its borders, the book of Exodus as such is something of a false data set. There was no concept of a “book” of Exodus per se, as an independent literary unit. It is, rather, a single volume of a continuous five-volume work, separated from what comes before and after probably on simple material grounds: it was not possible in ancient Israel to have the entire Pentateuch on a single scroll of parchment. In this regard, the tradition Greek name “Pentateuch,” meaning “five books,” is misleading. The Jewish term for the Torah, “hamisha humshei Torah,” meaning “the five fifths of the Teaching,” is more accurate (if also more unwieldy).

At the same time, the Pentateuch is not divided into books just anywhere they ran out of room. There is a natural break in plot, both at the beginning and at the end of Exodus. The era of the patriarchs has come to an end with the death of Joseph at the end of Genesis, a situation that

is recalled explicitly at the beginning of Exodus: “Joseph and his brothers and all that generation died” (Exod 1:6). We have a clear transition from the story of a family in Genesis to the story of a nation in Exodus, a transition that is marked by the shifting meaning of the phrase *bnei yisrael*—literally “the sons of Israel,” as it means almost everywhere in Genesis, the actual twelve sons of the patriarch Jacob/Israel; but after the death of Jacob’s sons in Exod 1:6, the phrase refers exclusively in the rest of Exodus and beyond to “the Israelites” as a people.

Similarly, the end of the book of Exodus is a sensible break before the ritual laws of Leviticus are given. Exodus concludes with the construction of the Tabernacle, the divine abode of Yahweh, from which the laws will be given. In the very last moments of Exodus 40, God descends and inhabits his new mobile home: “The cloud covered the Tent of Meeting, and the glory of Yahweh filled the Tabernacle” (Exod 40:34). Exodus therefore takes us on a path from a single relatively small family of Jacob’s descendants stuck in a foreign land to a people two million strong with their God dwelling firmly in their midst. This is the path that we will be exploring in this series.

Questions for reflection:

1. What is the relationship of the story told in Exodus to the patriarchal story that precedes it in Genesis?
2. What does it mean to talk about the “book” of Exodus?
3. Why do scholars identify multiple source documents in Exodus?
4. What is the value of recognizing these sources?

Basic reading:

J. S. Baden, *The Composition of the Pentateuch* (Anchor Yale Bible Reference Library; New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009), 13–33.

John J. Collins, *Introduction to the Hebrew Bible* (2nd edition; Minneapolis: Fortress, 2014) 109-142.

Walter Brueggemann, “The Book of Exodus,” *New Interpreter’s Bible* (ed. L. Keck et al.; Nashville: Abingdon, 1994) 1.677-87.