Exodus, meaning departure, or the "going out" of the Hebrews from slavery in Egypt, is perhaps the most important book in the Old Testament. The reason: it preserves the memory of foundational events, not only for the life and faith of ancient Israel in Old Testament times, but also for the life and faith of the new Israel witnessed to in the New Testament. Exodus emphasizes the cardinal salvation experience of the Jewish people in the departure event, and in the subsequent giving of the Law that cements their covenantal relationship with God. Within its pages lie the central dogma of the Jews.

The Book of Exodus is an integral part of the Torah, the Pentateuch, the five "scrolls" or books of Moses—Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, Deuteronomy—and must be understood from that perspective.

As prelude to Exodus, the Book of Genesis provides the context of the biblical drama in which the basic human problem of estrangement from God, and neighbor from neighbor, are portrayed (the Primeval history, Genesis chapters 1-11),
followed by the prologue (the Ancestral traditions, Genesis chapters 12-50), which records the emergence of the earliest Hebrew families and thus the beginning of a special stream of human history.

After the descent of Joseph and his family into Egypt, the Book of Exodus records the first act of this divine drama. It has four sections.

Chapters 1-6 tell of the enslavement of the Hebrews by the Egyptians, the birth of Moses, his time in the court of Pharaoh, and his flight and sojourn in the land of Midian, which culminates with his call to lead his people from their bondage.

Chapters 7-15 describe the plagues against the Egyptians, the Passover, and the passage of the Hebrews through the Sea to their freedom.

Chapters 16-18 recount their journey through the wilderness to Mt. Sinai.

Chapters 19-40 report their extended stay at Sinai, when their covenant with God is established, which involves both cultic and ethical commandments. These chapters describe the apostasy of the golden calf idolatry when the covenant is broken, and then recounts the renewed covenant through the divine mercy. A
prominent part of this section is the traditions having to do with the Tabernacle and the priesthood (chapters 25-31, 35-40).

The other books of the Pentateuch, Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy, continue the story through the rest of the life of Moses. The books of Joshua through II Kings extend the narrative with an account of the people in their Land from the Conquest to the Babylonian Exile.

Three questions can be helpful for understanding the Book of Exodus: 1) The Literary question; 2) The Historical question; 3) the Theological question.

I. The Literary Question

As part of the Pentateuch—the five books of Moses—Exodus has the same literary composition as the others. While not all contemporary scholars agree, the Pentateuch is probably comprised of four literary sources: the Jahwist (J) epic (composed in Jerusalem, *circa* 950 B.C.); the Elohist (E) tradition (composed in Northern Israel, 850 B.C.); the Deuteronomistic (its present form written in Jerusalem, 650 B.C.); and the Priestly (P) code (finished in Babylonian exile, 450 B.C.). Each of these
sources has its own distinctive literary style and theology. In the Book of Exodus J, E, and P are woven together throughout chapters 1-19; J and E in chapters 20-24, 32-34 and P alone in chapters 25-31, 35-40. Deuteronomist touches are evident as well.

Although these four documents were probably written, their earlier sources were almost certainly oral. These oral traditions would have preserved the memory of the original events from the time of Moses, but then adapted and developed both orally and in writing in subsequent years and centuries by various groups of Hebrews in various situations to meet their particular needs from the 13th century B.C. (the probable date for Moses) to the fifth century B.C. (the time of the final edition of P). Some of them may have been preserved and shaped by use in later worship, for example the Plague stories and in the celebration of the Passover and the Covenant traditions in chapters 7-13 and in ceremonies for renewal of the covenant in chapters 19-20, 24, 33-34.

The Book of Exodus has preserved two of the earliest poems in the Old Testament.
The Song of Miriam (15:21) is perhaps the oldest, and probably the original response of the Hebrews to their liberation from Egyptian slavery. The Song of Moses (15:1-19) is based on the Song of Miriam and tells of God's further saving activity until the early monarchy.

II. The Historical Question

In regard to the question concerning the actual events lying behind the stories in the Book of Exodus, there is a great deal of contemporary debate. A few scholars see the Mosaic traditions as basically fiction, created to meet the needs of Jewish groups in post-exilic times (i.e., after the sixth century B.C.). Others are less skeptical, with some interpreting them all rather literally. However, if the basic validity of the preceding discussion of the literary question is granted, it is clear that we have no eyewitness accounts from the period. These traditions have been transmitted over many centuries and have been colored by subsequent events and situations, and thus are far removed from the original events themselves. It would be unwise to accept them too literally. On the
other hand, if one is willing to give the traditions the benefit of historical doubt, it is not implausible to hold that the contours of the main events still shine through the traditions.

Although there is no extra-biblical confirmation of the events involving Moses, there is evidence that may point to a thirteenth century B.C. date for his activity. For example, Exodus 1:11 refers to Pithom and Ramses as store cities where the Hebrew slaves were forced to work. Excavations have revealed that in fact these cities were used by Ramses II (1290-1226 B.C.) for storage in connection with his military activities, and ʿapiru (Hebrew) slaves were employed there. One should also mention that the name Moses is an Egyptian name, as in Thut-mose III, the famous Pharaoh of the sixteenth century B.C., and others. This suggests an Egyptian context for his life and work.

Further, in the latter part of the thirteenth century (ca. 1220) B.C. a stele or commemorative pillar of the Egyptian Pharaoh Merneptah has been uncovered that actually bears the name “Israel,” the first extra-biblical reference we have to the Old Testament people. This can be
interpreted to mean that the group of Hebrews led out of Egypt by Moses (or their descendants) were now in the Promised Land under his successor, Joshua. In addition, archaeological excavations have revealed that from this period a number of crude new settlements were beginning to be established in the hills of Ephraim and Manasseh. These would presumably be early Hebrews.

This kind of evidence does not bring scientific certainty, but it does allow an interpreter to give the Mosaic traditions in the Book of Exodus the benefit of the historical doubt, at least in broad outline. Without falling prey to excessive credulity, we might tentatively suggest the following basic facts:

Moses was born to a Hebrew family in Egypt and was brought up under the influence of Egyptian culture. Identification with his people led him to an act of violence which forced him to flee across the Sinai peninsula to the Land of Midian. Under the influence of a profound religious experience, attributed to Yahweh, he returned to Egypt to rally his people and lead them out of their bondage. They fled amidst unusual natural phenomena, and,
although pursued by Egyptian soldiers, were able to pass safely through a large body of water. Having once realized their freedom, by faith they understood that the presence and power of God were involved in the event, as testified by the early Song of Miriam:

_Sing to the LORD, for he has triumphed gloriously; horse and rider he has thrown into the sea._

(15:21)

Exodus 12:38 speaks of a "mixed crowd" in connection with the escape, at the core of which were probably the clans who later settled in the central hill country, Manasseh and Ephraim, together called the House of Joseph.

The second major event recorded in Exodus is that which took place at Mt. Sinai. The exact site of this sacred mountain is uncertain, but traditionally it has been identified with _jebel musa_, a mountain in the southern part of the Sinai Peninsula. The details of the event are as uncertain as the location of the site, but it is possible that its contours shine through the early J,E traditions in chapters 19-20, 24, 33-34 and might be stated as follows:
At a holy mountain in the Sinai peninsula, a group of Hebrews under the leadership of Moses, in response to the exodus event and in connection with an awesome experience of the divine presence, entered into a solemn compact with God, whom they called Yahweh, vowed to worship him alone as well as keep other of his commandments, and sealed the relation in a sacred ceremony.

III. The Theological Question

For Christians who hear, read, mark, learn and inwardly digest the Bible as the Word of God, the Book of Exodus is extremely rich theologically. Among its words to believers three might be noted.

Call

First, the God of the Book of Exodus is a God who calls—calls to his service.

While he was shepherding sheep, out of the burning bush came the voice of God to Moses: "'So come, I will send you to Pharaoh to bring my people, the Israelites, out of Egypt...'. He said, 'I will be with you.'" (Exodus 3:10-12a)

Others in the Old Testament story are
called for other tasks. In the Book of Genesis, for example, Abraham is called to leave his "country, his kindred, and his father's house" for a journey to the Promised Land, where his descendants will become a blessing for "all the families of the earth." (Genesis 12:1-3) Later, prophets like Isaiah (chapter 6) and Jeremiah (chapter 1) are called to proclaim God's judging but compassionate word to his people.

The pattern continues to the New Testament. Jesus begins his ministry by calling Peter and Andrew to follow him. (Mark 1:16-20) On the road to Damascus Paul is called as a missionary to the Gentiles. (Acts, chapter 8)

And, that pattern continues for Christians today who through the Old Testament and the New are heirs of the faith of the shepherd Moses. The Lord, the God of Moses, and of the Good Shepherd, Jesus Christ, is the God who continues to call people to his service.

On occasion a call may come for a lifelong vocation, either within the Church or to service to God's people in any venue. The calls may not be as dramatic as those to Moses or Paul, but through
other people, during formal worship, or perhaps the quiet meditation of the heart, God's call does come to those who are sensitive and open to his will.

_O God, whose Son Jesus is the good shepherd of your people:_ Grant that when we hear his voice we may know him who calls us each by name, and follow where he leads; _who, with you and the Holy Spirit, lives and reigns, one God, for ever and ever. Amen._

(The Book of Common Prayer, p. 225)

**Liberation**

For Christians the God of the Book of Exodus, of the Old Testament, and of the New, is also a _God Who Liberates._

For the ancient Hebrews the Exodus was the most important event in their history. It was a root experience, which was basic for their subsequent understanding of the _LORD,_ their God, his nature and activity. That the _LORD_ is a liberating God, is the basic message of the Exodus.

From the time of Moses (Exodus 12-13) to the present this event has been remembered in the annual observance of the Passover. It is the freedom festival of the Jewish people.
For Christians, too, the Exodus event with its message of God’s concern for people in bondage has spoken through the ages. For example, it has spoken to African-Americans as well as to other oppressed racial and ethnic groups. Slavery, segregation, prejudice or any form of racial or ethnic bondage are repugnant in the eyes of the God of Moses and of the God of a twentieth century Moses, Martin Luther King, Jr., who proclaimed that biblical truth with power and eloquence.

Christians have often called the Exodus the resurrection event of the Old Testament, having the significance in the Old Testament that the Resurrection of Christ has in the New Testament. In fact, the Resurrection of Christ has been interpreted in terms of the Exodus. Just as God freed the Hebrew people from their bondage in Egypt, in the Resurrection God has freed people from the even deeper bondage of death. No passage of the New Testament speaks more clearly to this truth than John 3:16:

“For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who
believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life."

O God, who by the glorious resurrection of your Son Jesus Christ destroyed death and brought life and immortality to light: Grant that we, who have been raised with him, may abide in his presence and rejoice in the hope of eternal glory; through Jesus Christ our Lord, to whom with you and the Holy Spirit, be dominion and praise for ever and ever. Amen.

(The Book of Common Prayer, p. 223)

Covenant

Third, the Book of Exodus affirms that God enters into covenant with his people.

If the Exodus can be termed the Resurrection event of the Old Testament, the Covenant might be called the Pentecost event.

In the covenant at Sinai, in response to the Exodus, the ancient Hebrews were brought into a special relation with God, a covenant relation; they were constituted as the "church" of Israel, so to speak.

"You have seen what I did to the Egyptians, and how I bore you on eagles' wings
and brought you to myself. Now, therefore, if you obey my voice and keep my covenant, you shall be my treasured possession out of all the peoples. Indeed, the whole earth is mine, but you shall be for me a priestly kingdom and a holy nation. These are the words that you shall speak to the Israelites.” (Exodus 19:4-6)

The New Testament picks up the theme of covenant and affirms that on the basis of Christ’s Cross and Resurrection God has offered a New Covenant to all people—a covenant of reconciliation.

“%In Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting the message of reconciliation to us.” (II Corinthians 5:19)

This belief is at the heart of the Christian understanding of the Church. From the day of Pentecost to this very day the Church of Jesus Christ has been constituted as a people who have been reconciled to God and to one another. Further, they stand under the obligation of being messengers and instruments of reconciliation to all the peoples of the earth.
Almighty and everlasting God, who in the Paschal mystery established the new covenant of reconciliation: Grant that all who have been reborn into the fellowship of Christ's Body may show forth in their lives what they profess by their faith; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. Amen.

(The Book of Common Prayer, p. 224)

God calls, God liberates, God enters into covenant. These are three basic theological truths of the Book of Exodus.

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