

EXODUS

Ellis T. Rasmussen, *Letter-day Commentary on the Old Testament* (Salt Lake City 1993)

Exodus tells how the Lord saved the Israelites from death in Egypt to prepare them for their life and mission in the promised land. Since through the seed of Abraham all nations are to be blessed (TG, "Israel, Mission of"), Israel needed rescue from spiritual and physical destruction in Egypt. The Lord's purpose was made evident when he said to Pharaoh through Moses: "Israel is my son, even my firstborn: . . . Let my son go, that he may serve me" (Ex. 4:22-23). The nature of Israel's relationship with the Lord was also clarified: "If ye will obey my voice indeed, and keep my covenant, then ye shall be a peculiar treasure unto me above all people; for all the earth is mine; And ye shall be unto me a kingdom of priests, and an holy nation" (Ex. 19:5-6). The Israelite people did not attain to consecration or broad priestly service, but a start was made. The rest of the Old Testament recounts Israel's efforts, successes, and failures. It also shows how the prophets tried to correct the people's faults and engender growth and goodness.

Various other scriptures allude to Exodus. Psalms 105 and 106 poetically overview the highlights; Nephi tells why the chosen people had not inherited the land generations earlier but were permitted to enter after the Exodus (1 Ne. 17:33-35; Gen. 15:13-16). Other scriptures reiterate and elucidate the eternal principles and doctrines recorded in revelations to Moses (TG, "Israel, Mission of"; "Law of Moses").

Commentary

1:1-5 the children of Israel, which came into Egypt

The names of the twelve sons of Jacob who brought their families into Egypt are listed; "besides Jacob's sons' wives," seventy members of the extended family of Israel who entered Egypt were named previously in Genesis 46:3-27. Considering all the wives of all the sons and the husbands of all the daughters, as well as their children and grandchildren and spouses, the total of Israel's clan could have been hundreds (cf. 1 Chr. 4-8). Thus, in the fourth generation from Jacob (Gen. 15:16; Ex. 6:16-26), the Israelites could have been numerous enough to be called "a great nation" of those times (Gen. 46:3; Ex. 1:7).

Regarding the time that the children of Israel spent in Egypt, the apostle Paul evidently understood that there were four hundred thirty years from the time of Abraham's receiving the promise until the giving of the Mosaic law; this would make the "sojourn" in Egypt about two hundred fifteen years (Gen. 15:13; Gal. 3:16-17; Ex. 12:40-41 in the Greek Old Testament; confirmed by Josephus, *Antiquities of the Jews* 2:15:2; BD, "Chronological Tables"). Because Israel lived there in peace for seventy-one years of Joseph's life, one hundred forty-four years would have remained, some of them under Pharaohs of the favorable dynasty before the dynasty arose "which knew not Joseph" (Ex. 1:8; BD, "Egypt"; "Exodus"; "Pharaoh").

1:6-14 Israel . . . waxed exceeding mighty. . . Therefore they did set over them taskmasters to afflict them

Several reasons are given for Israel's bondage: they became numerous, grew mighty, and became a potential military danger to Egypt; and a new king arose with no memory of Joseph and no reason to favor his people any longer (possibly the dynasty that replaced the Hyksos, about 1540 B.C.).

The name of one of the "treasure cities" of the time was Raamses (Ex. 1:11); this name has been cited as evidence that the Pharaoh of the bondage of Israel was Rameses II (commentary on Gen. 47:11; BD, "Rameses").

1:12 the more they afflicted them, the more they multiplied and grew

It is plausible that the Israelites could suffer under bondage and oppression for a long time and yet grow ever stronger, in view of what has happened to modern Israelites, the Jews, during centuries of persecution and oppression. Until the Holocaust of the 1940s, they had become numerous in many lands.

1:15-22 midwives feared God, . . . saved the . . . children

Israelites who had knowledge of God and regard for the right are exemplified by the two courageous midwives who did not kill the male babies as they had been ordered, because they revered the heavenly King more than they feared the earthly one (Ex. 1:17, 21). The frustrated Pharaoh ordered "all his people" to kill the Hebrew babies; but God "dealt well with the midwives." "He made them houses" is a biblical phrase that can mean He blessed them with families; a similar expression is used later in a promise to David (Ex. 1:20-22 and fn.).

1:19 the Hebrew women are not as the Egyptian women . . . and are delivered ere the midwives come

The testimony of the midwives is quite credible about the contrast between some of the hardy Hebrew working women and some delicate Egyptian court women. Such a contrast is evident in pictures from ancient Egyptian tombs.

2:1-10 she had compassion on him, and said, This is one of the Hebrews' children

Moses was born under Pharaoh's decree of death for male Hebrew babies (Ex. 1:16, 22); but with courage and ingenuity, his parents kept him safe for a time and then put him in a reed basket on the river where his sister could watch until he was found by Pharaoh's own daughter. Compassionately she saved him, though she knew he was a Hebrew baby. It is likely that the Spirit of the Lord moved her to do so and also to accept "a nurse of the Hebrew women," although she must have known the "nurse" was the baby's mother. The name she gave him had appropriate meaning in both languages (Ex. 2:10a-b).

Some of Moses' education was doubtless given by his mother-nurse; for he later knew he was a Hebrew and he was concerned about his people. He was also "learned in all the wisdom of the Egyptians" (Ex. 2:11a; Acts 7:22; Josephus, *Antiquities of the Jews* 2:9:7).

2:11-15 when Moses was grown, . . . he went out unto his brethren

Moses was very distressed when he saw a fellow Hebrew being smitten by an Egyptian, and his hour of decision came. As he looked upon their suffering and perceived the crisis, he rose up and "slew" the Egyptian who was "smiting" the Hebrew. The same Hebrew verb translated *smiting* in verse 11 is translated *slew* in verse 12; it is a verb used to describe what soldiers do in battle. Thus Moses did to the Egyptian what he was doing to the Hebrew. His action destroyed a life but was in defense of a life. He "looked this way and that" (Ex. 2:12) before doing so; for he knew his action would not be condoned by any Egyptian.

Next day, however, when he tried to settle a conflict between two Hebrews, he was rebuffed with words that let him know his previous act was known, and he had to flee. In the New Testament, Stephen had information that caused him to say of Moses, "he supposed his brethren would have understood how that God by his hand would deliver them: but they understood not" (Acts 7:25).

Soon, Pharaoh "sought to slay Moses," and he fled to "the land of Midian" (Ex. 2:15), in the Sinai peninsula. This, too, proved to be a providential move.

2:16-22 Now the priest of Midian had seven daughters

In Midian Moses was blessed to find refuge with a true high priest of God, Reuel, or Jethro (Ex. 2:18; 3:1; 4:18; BD, "Jethro"). Through him Moses received the Melchizedek Priesthood, which had been transmitted through several generations from the time of Abraham (D&C 84:6-16). Recall that Abraham and Keturah had a son named Midian (Gen. 25:1-4).

Moses received Zipporah, a daughter of Jethro, as his wife, and she bore him children, the first of whom was named Gershom (Ex. 2:22b). There is no record of children by an earlier wife, an Ethiopian princess he is said to have married—a deed for which his brother and sister later found fault with him (Num. 12:1; Josephus, *Antiquities of the Jews* 2:10:2).

2:23-25 God remembered his covenant with Abraham

The time had arrived for Israel's redemption from bondage. The Pharaoh of Egypt who inaugurated Israel's enslavement had died, but the Israelites still suffered and cried unto God for relief. God chose this time to implement the next phase of his covenant with the seed of Abraham, so that they might implement their mission (Ex. 2:24b, 25a).

3:1-6 the angel of the Lord appeared unto him in a flame of fire out of the midst of a bush

In the course of history, the presence of God has been shown by several phenomena: a mighty wind, a still small voice, a great thundering, a bright light, a flame of fire (see TG, "God, Privilege of Seeing"). A "flame of fire" in a bush manifested to Moses the presence of the Lord. After Moses' attention was thus focused, the Lord spoke and Moses heard the words from the flaming bush (Ex. 3:2a-c). Removing his shoes at that holy place was a way of showing reverence; it is still practiced in some holy places.

3:7-12 I will send thee unto Pharaoh, that thou mayest bring forth my people the children of Israel out of Egypt

The Lord is aware of the suffering and the prayers of people and He brings the relief that circumstances warrant. At the time Israel was in urgent need of a homeland, the occupants of Canaan were ripe in iniquity, and so the land could be made available to the Israelites if they could make themselves worthy of God's help (Gen. 15:16; Lev. 18:24-29; 1 Ne. 17:32-35).

The Lord's call required Moses to undertake a mission for which he humbly felt unqualified, but the Lord reassured him, saying, "Because I shall be with thee, this shall be a sign to thee that I have sent thee" (Ex. 3:12, translation mine).

The place where Moses was with his flocks, at "the backside of the desert" near "the mountain of God, . . . Horeb" (Ex. 3:1), was appointed by the Lord as the place to assemble the people, saying, "Ye shall serve God upon this mountain" (Ex. 3:12).

3:13-15 say unto the children of Israel, I AM hath sent me unto you. . . . The Lord God of your fathers . . . sent me

No doubt concerned about his rejection by the Israelites, who had asked him, "Who made thee a prince and a judge over us?" (Ex. 2:14), Moses asked the Lord how he should answer if they should ask for the name of Him who sent him. The Lord then revealed the sacred name *I AM* and *JHVH*, now traditionally pronounced "Jehovah" but shown in English Bibles by the substitute word *Lord*. Such pronunciations as "Ya-hoveh," "Yaweh," or "Yaveh" have been suggested. The name can mean "He who is" and "He who causes to be." To Moses he identified himself in first person as "I AM THAT I AM" and bade Moses tell Israel, "I AM hath sent me unto you."

This revelation actually restored and explicated the divine name, for *JHVH* is found in Hebrew from the beginning of Genesis. In the days of Seth and Enos, the people began to "call upon the name of the Lord"; and the forefathers Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob all used that divine name (Gen. 4:26; Abr. 1:16; Gen. 22:14; 27:7; 28:13; commentary on Gen. 2:4).

3:16-22 I have surely . . . seen that which is done to you in Egypt; And . . . I will bring you up out of . . . affliction

The Lord knew, of course, about Israel's suffering, their need of leaders, the nature of the Pharaoh, the way to persuade him to let Israel go, and how Israel could be partly compensated for her years of servitude (Ex. 3:22a-b).

The "elders of Israel" (Ex. 3:16) were the patriarchal heads of the extended families, or clans, and were the natural leaders through whom Moses and the Lord could work. Though the Lord knew Pharaoh would not let Israel go into the wilderness to offer sacrifice, He allowed Pharaoh his agency to respond to Moses' request.

4:1-9 if they will not believe thee, neither . . . the first sign, . . . they will believe . . . the latter sign

Signs are used at times to teach and give proof, but miracles more often occur in compassionate service (BD, "Miracles"; TG, "Miracle"; "God, Manifestations of"; "Sign"; "Sign Seekers"). For the faithful, miracles are usually a reward of faith, to fulfill some urgent need (Mosiah 8:18; D&C 63:9-10).

4:10-17 I am not eloquent, . . . but I am slow of speech

The Lord, who "made man's mouth" was able to teach Moses what he should say (Ex. 4:11-12). He was not pleased with Moses' excuses and reluctance, but He still authorized Aaron to become Moses' spokesman. A spokesman for God is a prophet of God, and Aaron would be a prophet for Moses, who would "be to him instead of God" in conveying messages (Ex. 4:16a-c). This was the beginning of the "call of Aaron," and more about his call, ordination, and mode of service follows (Ex. 7:1-2; Lev. 8; Num. 3; Heb. 5:4).

4:18-20 Jethro said to Moses, Go in peace. And the Lord said, . . . Go, return into Egypt: for all the men are dead which sought thy life

Moses asked leave of Jethro, his employer and father-in-law, and he departed with Jethro's blessing, going under the Lord's direction.

A change of rulers had occurred in Egypt sometime during Moses' forty years with Jethro (BD, "Pharaoh").

The second of Moses' three periods of life, each forty years in length, was now finished (Ex. 7:7; Deut. 31:2; 34:7; Acts 7:23, 30).

4:21 but I will harden his heart, that he will not let the people go

This enigmatic statement is only "the word of God as far as it is translated correctly" (A of F 8; see the correction cited in Ex. 4:21c).

Harden is an English word used in the account of Moses' missions to translate three different Hebrew verbs. It is used as if the translators understood that God had planned and staged a dramatic sequence to demonstrate his powers, but that idea is not likely. One of those verbs is *khazaq*, in a form meaning "to make strong" or "to show to be strong" (Ex. 4:21; 8:15; 9:12; 9:35; 10:20). Another verb used is *kabad*, in forms meaning "to make heavy, weighty, important" (Ex. 8:32; 9:34; 10:1). The third is *qashah*, "to make harsh or hard" (Ex. 7:3). The translations are corrected in the Joseph Smith Translation (see fn. to the various passages cited above).

Incidentally, though there are many instances of the "hardening" of hearts recorded in the Book of Mormon, it is never said there that the Lord hardened anyone's heart. People made their own hearts hard, or Satan hardened them, but God did not do it.

4:22-23 Israel is my son, even my firstborn: . . . Let my son go, that he may serve me

This statement of the Lord shows his prime intent in saving Israel. "Firstborn" is here used figuratively; the firstborn in any family was customarily the one who bore the responsibilities of conserving the family's inheritance and perpetuating its way of life. The way of life to be perpetuated and the mission inheritance to be conserved by Israel, as Abraham's seed, has been frequently cited in the commentary above (TG, "Abrahamic Covenant"; "Israel, Mission of"; BD, "Abraham, Covenant of").

4:20, 24-26 the Lord met him, and sought to kill him. . . . Surely a bloody husband art thou to me

As Moses and his family journeyed toward Egypt, something went wrong, but the words used here do not tell what it was. Surely if the Lord "sought to kill" a man He would not fail to do so. The inspired revision provides a better understanding of the matter. The phrase "bloody husband" is used later to translate a similar idiom that designated a recipient of the covenant of circumcision. Doubtless Moses, as a previous recipient, should have performed the rite on his son; Joseph Smith's inspired translation indicates that Moses was ashamed that he had not done so (Ex. 4:24a-c, 25b). After the operation, Zipporah returned with the children to the home of her father, Jethro, until Moses' rescue mission was over and the Israelites were encamped at Sinai (Ex. 18:1-6).

4:27-28 the Lord said to Aaron . . . , Go . . . to meet Moses

Aaron was personally "called of God" to begin his mission (Ex. 4:14-16, 27; Heb. 5:4). He accordingly went to the "mount of God" (Sinai) to meet Moses and be instructed.

4:29-31 gathered together all the elders . . . And . . . spake all the words which the Lord had spoken unto Moses

Moses and Aaron instructed the Israelite elders and performed the miracles as they had been authorized (see commentary on Ex. 3:16). The grateful people believed, "bowed their heads and worshipped" (Ex. 4:31). As mentioned before, there are legitimate reasons for miracles, even though there are dangers in a doubter's "seeking for a sign" (BD, "Miracles"; TG, "Sign Seekers").