

Exodus

Introduction

The Book of Exodus is the second book in every version of the Bible; Jewish and Christian. The central person in Exodus is Moses, an Israelite who is raised within the royal family. The story begins many years after the end of Genesis and tells of how the Israelites, welcomed by Joseph, are now enslaved. The book tells how Moses came to confront Pharaoh and lead the people out of Egypt. Rather than immediately going back to Canaan, the Israelites take up a nomadic lifestyle, which many don't like. The book ends with Moses badgering God to offer promises and symbols of God's presence among them.

It is arguably the most important book in the Hebrew Scriptures, as it tells of the defining concept of Israel's identity; a people freed and sustained wholly through the actions of God. It also tells of the establishment of the Law, which is a far richer legal system than the earlier patriarchal covenants and it lays out the basic formulas for Israelite worship.

Traditionally, Moses was the attributed author of Exodus (as well as Genesis, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy) and it with the other Mosaic texts is known as Torah. Most scholars today believe that Exodus, in the form we know it today, was completed in the post-exile period in the 5th century BCE, though most likely drawing on older writings and traditions.

As to the historical veracity of the story in Exodus, there is great debate. Archeology suggests that the Israelites have a predominantly Canaanite origin, and so far, there have been no archeological or historical records found that corroborate the Exodus story. However, there are historical parallels with many of the basic pieces of the story, Semitic slaves in Egypt, Foreign pharaohs, famines, etc. Further, linguistics shows that Egyptian words entered into ancient proto-Hebrew in the era to most likely have included the Exodus (around 1200-1300 BCE). It should also be noted that the names Moses, Miriam, and Aaron are all Egyptian in origin.

So, we can fairly conclude that though the story told in Exodus may not be 100% accurate, it is based on historical memory (even if embellished) that captures something true about ancient Israel's existence.

Exodus

Chapter 1

This chapter primarily serves to set the stage for the story of Moses by updating us on everything that's occurred since The Israelites came to Egypt under Joseph's invitation.

V1-7 We get the sons of Jacob, organized by mother, who along with Jacob joined Joseph. The number 70 seems to include all of those who made the journey; sons, daughters, spouses, grandchildren, etc. We are also told God's promise to Abraham (which is repeated to all the patriarchs) to give descendants greater than the number of stars in the sky is being fulfilled.

V5 in Hebrew the phrase translated as "born to Jacob" is literally "coming from Jacob's thigh" (remember that the oaths to Jacob were sworn by holding onto his "thigh")

V8-10 Despite their long sojourn in Egypt, the Israelites are still considered foreign and feared, though the idea that they would have outnumbered the Egyptians is clearly hyperbolic as scholars estimate the population of ancient Egypt in this era was between 2 and 4 million.

V11-14 In order to mitigate the perceived threat, the Israelites are subjugated to a harsh regime of forced labor by the new Pharaoh. Despite that, because of God's promises, the Israelites continue to grow in number.

V15-22 The story of the midwives is more like a fable than actual history, but it is notable that these two women are both named and given agency – pretty rare in the Bible. Realistically, a population well served by only two midwives probably wouldn't be very large.

V16 the term translated "birth stool" is in the original Hebrew "two stones/bricks." Why kill only males? Egyptian culture was patrilineal – identity was determined by the father. This was probably true for Israel as well at this point, Judaism doesn't appear to have become matrilineal until around the time of Jesus, perhaps in response to the large number of deaths in the Jewish War of ca. 70CE

V17 Though the ethnicity of the midwives is ambiguous, that they "feared God" suggests they were also Hebrews.

V18-19 Thankfully, like most men throughout history, Pharaoh is pretty ignorant of childbirth.

V21 “families” = “houses” in original Hebrew. It could mean families as translated here or freedom from Pharaoh (literal houses).

V22 Because the midwife plan didn't work, Pharaoh empowers all the Egyptians to murder Hebrew infants who are male. The culpability of the Egyptian population here accounts for the plagues of the Passover.

Exodus Chapter 2

Enter Moses

V1-4 Moses is born to unnamed parents (they do get named later in the text) and because of the command to murder Hebrew boys, he is hidden but eventually his mother is unable to keep him safe and decides to put him in a little boat.

This story is very similar to the legend of King Sargon of Mesopotamia (ca 2300BC), where he was born in secret to a priestess mother who set him adrift on a river, where he was found by the common laborer who raised him. In his youth, Sargon was visited by Ishtar—goddess of desire, fertility, storms, and warfare—who loved him. Inspired by her, he rose from obscurity and took the world by storm. The story seems clearly intended to show that Sargon was entitled to rule Mesopotamia, however humble his origins.

V5-10 This is a really interesting story and shows that the harshness of Pharaoh is not equally shared by all Egyptians, even those in his own house. So instead of being killed, Moses survives and even better, his mother is taken onto the royal payroll to take care of him. Moses returns when he is weaned, not fully grown.

Though in Hebrew, moses has come to mean the one who draws out, in Egypt mose means “son of”

V11 It's unclear how many years have passed or exactly how old Moses is here but I think it's interesting that he is aware that he is a Hebrew – must have been awkward with his adopted grandfather!

V12-15 Moses defends a Hebrew from an Egyptian who is beating them and “strikes” the Egyptian. We assume the Egyptian is killed because Moses “hides” him in the sand.

Clearly, he was seen, because the next day two Hebrews resent his intrusion into their argument and ask if he intends to kill them as well.

V16 Moses flees to Midian, which was likely the region on the east coast of the Red Sea in what is today Saudi Arabia.

V16-17 Moses again comes to the defense of people being attacked, this time the daughters of man who is a priest (though to whom is unclear). Clearly this is a region without any strong central authority.

V18-20 The priest, Reuel (or Reu El, friend of God), showing hospitality (remember how important that is in Genesis) has his daughters invite Moses to their home to thank him.

V21-22 Moses marries one of the daughters and they have a son. In Hebrew Ger-sham means a foreigner.

V23-25 Pharaoh dies, but the suffering of the Israelites continues and God is taking notice.

Exodus

Chapter 3

Chapter three tells of the beginning of Moses' relationship with God and has two very famous stories, that of the burning bush and Moses seeking God's name.

V1 Where previously we were told that the father-in-law's name was Reuel (friend of God) here he is referred to as Jethro (Jethro is probably derived from the Hebrew word for "overflowing" and probably relates to his generosity in hospitality).

The scriptures seem to suggest that Mt Sinai and Mt Horeb are the same place, though it is admittedly ambiguous. Horeb comes from the word for glowing/heat and Sinai from the Mesopotamian moon goddess, Sin, so Horeb and Sinai would be the mountains of the sun and moon.

One of the oldest names for God is El Shaddai, which is translated as God of Thunder (or Storms) and mountains are often stormy places.

V2-3 The famous tale of the burning bush.

Though it says an angel of the Lord, that formulation is meant to convey God's self. We might say something like the "spirit of the God" instead.

God appears as light and in a miraculous way so as to garner Moses' attention.

V4-6 God calls out to Moses, repeating his name twice but then commands Moses to come no closer, because where God is, of course, is holy ground.

God identifies Godself to Moses as being the god of the Patriarchs (though one may wonder how much of the story of the Patriarchs would Moses know, he was raised as an Egyptian after all).

Moses looks down, fearing that to look a god directly in the face would be unwise and likely deadly.

V7-9 As we already read at the end of Ch 2, God has been paying attention to the suffering of the Israelites and has decided to act.

Of course, his plan is to bring them to a place already filled with other peoples; but most importantly it is a land that will provide all they need *through God's* generosity.

V10-12 God now gets to the point with Moses; God has decided to act and Moses is to be the tool.

Moses is understandably perplexed by this; asking "why me?"

I think this is a good point to pause and point out some of the ways that Moses differs from the patriarchs, the heroes thus far.

Moses is not descended from the patriarchs; God seems to have abandoned the patriarchal system of passing along blessings to a favored son and instead offers blessing to *all* the descendants of Jacob. Further, Moses is said to be from the tribe of Levi, if we recall the end of Genesis, Levi and Simeon were cursed by their father for their violent ways.

Moses seems to be a pretty decent guy. He is continually shown to be concerned by aiding those who are being unfairly treated or oppressed. This is a big change from the self-serving behaviors of the patriarchs.

Moses is an outsider, he may be ethnically an Israelite but he was raised as an Egyptian and at this point in the story is happy where he is and probably feels that, after being threatened by (and likely turned on by) his fellow Israelites, they deserve their fate as slaves.

Also note that God isn't asking to make a covenant with *Moses* and isn't promising riches or endless ancestors – God's not really promising anything at all.

V13-15 Given his earlier treatment by the Hebrews, Moses seems understandably concerned that he will not be accepted by them, let alone capable of leading them. His question also reinforces our understanding that Moses knew little or nothing about Hebrew culture (including anything about their God).

In the original Hebrew, "the Lord" in v15 is YHWH and to say I AM who I AM is a kind of word play because in Hebrew it would be HYAH (*hayah/ehyeh*). And in Hebrew, God's "I AM" connotes a much more powerful state of being than mere existence it suggests a real and manifest solidarity with the people.

So, God defines god's own self in terms of what God is doing and in terms of God's relationship to Israel rather than just giving a "name" as we usually think of it.

Scripture gives God many titles beyond these of course.

V16-22 God now reveals Moses' very simple mission: Go to Egypt, convince the people you are God's representative, and then got to Pharaoh (the most powerful person on earth- who , btw, hates the Israelites) and convince to let you take a long weekend. AND... when you do leave you will be RICH!

Simple.

Exodus Chapter 4

Moses and God continue to negotiate over the mission to the Hebrews with Moses, finally, reluctantly, agreeing.

V1 Despite God's clear plan, Moses is still reluctant, basing his reluctance not necessarily in his own abilities (or even God's) but in the receptivity of the Hebrews.

V2-5 The first "proof" is a staff that turns into a snake. Presumably it would become a snake anytime Moses threw it to the ground and would return to a staff when picked up (though that isn't explicit).

V6-8 The second "proof" is the ability to turn his hand leprous and then return it to health. Again it isn't explicit that this is repeatable though it is certainly implied

V9 and the third and final "proof" is that Noah will be able to draw water out of the Nile and pour it out as blood (water to wine sounds way better) though it does foreshadow the holy communion.

V10-12 Moses still doesn't want to go, despite the neat tricks and this time he does base his reluctance in his own abilities. In this case it isn't clear whether Moses is saying he has a physical impediment, just isn't good at extemporaneous speech, or just feels his Egyptian is rusty, but God brushes his concern aside.

V13-17 Moses still demurs and God, clearly frustrated, tells him that Aaron, his brother, is on his way and besides, Aaron will be his partner and he is a wonderful speaker (maybe God should have led with this bit of important info).

V18-20 Moses gets Jethro's permission and also learns that the previous Pharaoh is dead, so he finally relents and heads off.

V21-23 God gives away a little of what will happen, but we may wonder why God would cause Pharaoh to do the opposite of what God intends – why not just soften his heart?

This desire on God's part to make the Egyptians suffer is a perplexing point to most modern readers. Partly it's a three-thousand-year gap in cultural understanding that we

just can't bridge and partly a misunderstanding of God's true nature on the part of the ancient Israelites who misinterpreted their own history.

V24-26 Ok, so this episode makes absolutely no sense and suggests that God made a mistake in calling Moses because God had been unaware that Moses sons were uncircumcised? Full credit to Zipporah's quick thinking, though one wonders about that thought process that begins with divine attack and ends with cut of the end of my son's penis and rub it on his father's penis!

V27-31 Despite God having said that Aaron was on his way, here it seems as though God only sends Aaron off after the unfortunate incident of the penis. Nonetheless, the two brothers meet and apparently go to Egypt and meet with the elders.

What should be noted though is that it is not Moses who shows the proofs, but Aaron. This is probably an instance of different traditions being brought together in this final version of the story and there being some continuity problems.

Exodus Chapter 5

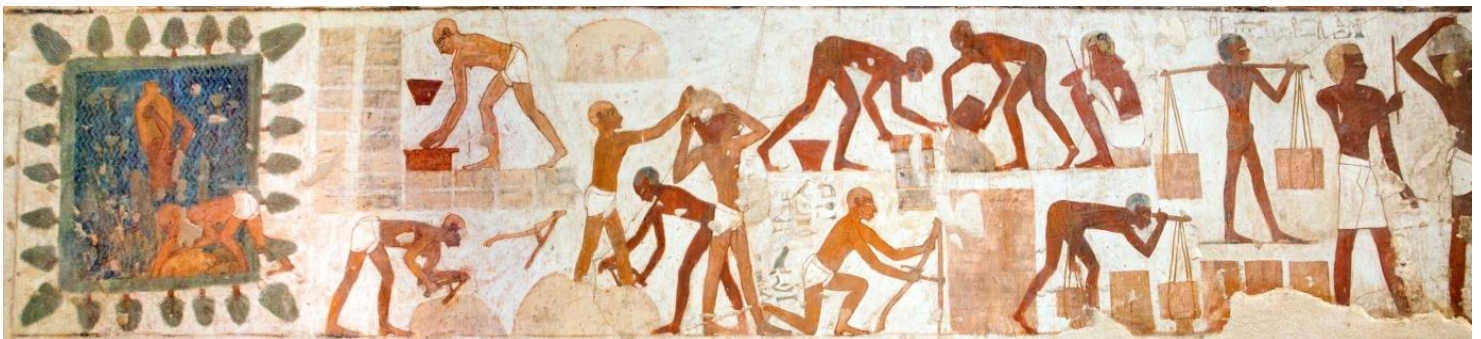
Moses begins his confrontation with Pharaoh.

V1-2 with the Hebrew elders on board, Moses and Aaron then get an audience with Pharaoh and ask that the Hebrews be given three days off to worship, but Pharaoh scoffs at such a suggestion, dismissing the God of Israel (as predicted).

V3-4 They ask again and this time add that their God will punish them if they aren't allowed to worship, but unsurprisingly, Pharaoh isn't super concerned about the potential suffering of Hebrews and tells them to get back to work.

V5-9 This Pharaoh reiterates the concerns of the previous Pharaoh about the growing number of Hebrews (logically if they were that worried, they'd try to get them to leave you might think but the Egyptians are probably used to the slave labor to easily give it up). Archeologists have found scrolls from this era ~1300BCE, that depict brick making as a highly centralized activity with punishments for not meeting quotas. They also mention that Egyptian laborers were given time off for religious holidays.

At any rate, Pharaoh, decides the Hebrews are just being lazy and so adds to their labors but doesn't relent on the expectations of productivity



BRICK MAKING IN EGYPT. Painted on the walls of the Theban tomb of Rakhmire (mid-15th century B.C.E.), who was the Egyptian vizier, these scenes depict the manufacture of mudbricks. Included are all stages of brick making (bottom, left to right): fetching of water, kneading of clay, and carrying of moistened clay to brick makers. The top register depicts (right to left): forming of the bricks using a mold, turning of formed bricks out of a mold, and leaving the bricks to dry in the sun. Straw, which is added to the clay mix as opening material, does not appear.

V10-14 We get a sense of how the system worked; there were Egyptian taskmasters, probably nobles who were contracted by the royal court to produce bricks. In turn, the contractors relied on Hebrew overseers (supervisors) to handle the actual work. As we see here, the Taskmasters and supervisors both have strong incentives to try to keep making as many bricks as before – all of which means that the suffering of the actual laborers is likely also increasing.

V15-19 Now the Hebrew overseers go to Pharaoh to ask for help, but Pharaoh doesn't relent and specifically says that it is the demand to go and worship (Aaron and Moses demand) that is the cause of their misery. This is a classic divide and conquer strategy, where Pharaoh is aiming to motivate the Hebrew overseers to rise against Moses and Aaron and the elders.

V20-25 And now we see that Pharaoh's strategy to divide the Hebrews is working! The overseers confront Aaron and Moses and lay the blame for their predicament solely on them.

But we also see that Moses is not unaffected by the anger of his fellow Hebrews and all of his doubts rise again as he questions God's plan and God's intentions.

Exodus Chapter 6

This chapter is divided into two parts, the first is the continuation of the dialogue between Moses and God, continuing directly from ch 5 and focused on God's seeming inability to do much for the Hebrews. The second half is a genealogy.

V1 God here responds to Moses' charge that God has "done nothing at all to deliver your people."

But God's response is all promise and will do, which probably doesn't offer Moses much comfort. The fundamental question here has to do with calculating the value of being God's chosen people – of what use is it in the world as we experience it? And this question is woven through much of the scriptures and in the extra-Biblical commentary of Judaism.

V2-8 This passage is very similar to the conversation at the burning bush and makes all the same points.

- The one talking is God Almighty (El Shaddai in Hebrew) who previously was aka YHWH
- This God is the same God who revealed themselves to the Patriarchs
- The Hebrews are a set-aside people in a special relationship
- God is coming to rescue the people from slavery
- God will take them to a promised land where they will thrive

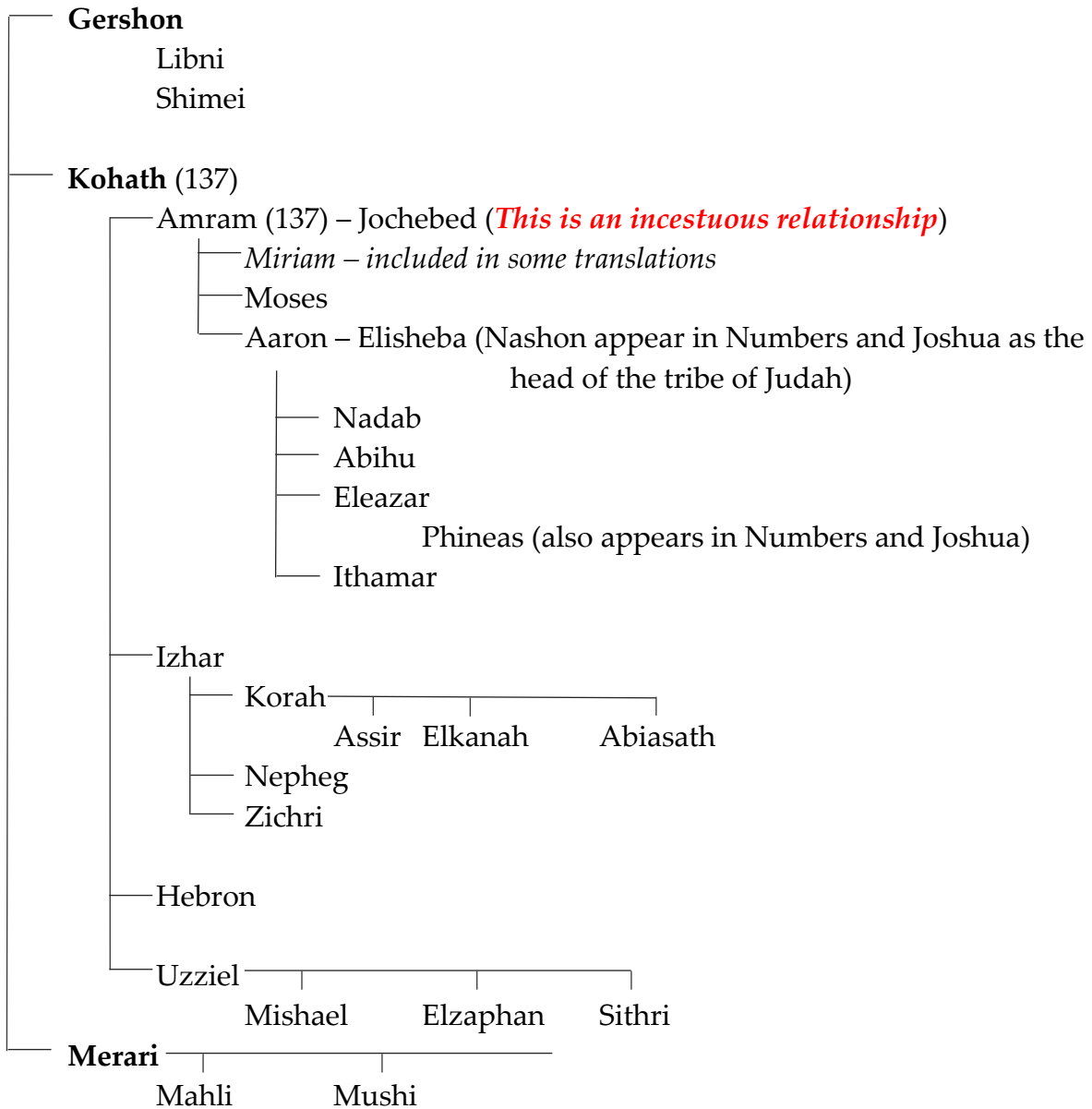
V10-13 God again commands Moses to speak to the Israelites and the Pharaoh and Moses again demurs, citing his poor speaking ability, and God again appoints Aaron to speak for him.

V14-27 This genealogy is primarily interested in defining the origins of the different priestly castes. Levites were religious authorities with responsibilities for maintaining the worship system of ancient Israel. The Temple priests were a subset of Levites who were descended from Aaron and only these could be High Priest.

Reuben ————
 Hanoch Pallu Hezron Carmi

Simeon ————
 Jemuel Jamin Ohad Jachin Zohar Shaul

Levi (137)



V28-30 We'll consider these verses with chapter 7

Exodus Chapter 7

Chapter seven begins the confrontation with the Pharaoh and the series of “plagues” orchestrated by God to bring about the surrender of the Pharaoh and to highlight God’s power.

6:28-7:2 A reiteration of God’s earlier command to Moses that he and Aaron are to confront Pharaoh and demand Israel’s freedom. Mostly these passages underscore that Aaron and Moses speak on God’s behalf.

V3-7 The passage suggests that the hardening of Pharaoh’s heart, like the plagues themselves, are all designed to showcase God’s power and to instill respect for and fear of God into people.

Again, the scriptures suggest that Moses and Aaron are pretty old, with their vigor being another sign of God’s favor.

V8-13 We might remember that God had earlier transformed Moses’ staff into a snake, but here it is Aaron whose walking stick gets the snake treatment.

The word Magician here, in Hebrew, is referring to a type of priest in Egypt and is only ever used to describe them.

Aaron’s snake swallowing the Egyptians snakes echoes the dreams Pharaoh had back in chapter 41 of Genesis foretelling the draught.

V14-19 The first plague is similar to the “sign” God gave to Moses where he was able to pour out water and let it be blood when it hit the ground. Here though, the plague is meant to unfold in two distinct steps. In the first, Moses strikes the Nile with his staff, turning it to blood, and in the second, Aaron waves his staff around and turns *all* the standing water in Egypt, not just the Nile, to blood.

V20-25 Moses and Aaron do as instructed but it makes no impact on Pharaoh, mostly because he is unimpressed by the plague, so the Egyptians dig wells, which apparently is a loophole.

Exodus Chapter 8

This chapter and on through chapter 10 describe the series of “plagues” which God unleashes on Egypt. This chapter contains three plagues of creepy crawly things, frogs, gnats, and flies; aka Summer in the Adirondacks.

V1-4 Chapter 7 ended by remarking that a week had passed since all the water was turned to blood, possibly to allow the water to return to normal to provide a place for all the frogs to spawn- it isn't explicit in the text whether or not the water is still compromised.

God tells Moses of how the frogs will be everywhere and in everything.

V5-8 Following the established formula, Moses tell Aaron what to do, Aaron raises his staff and brings forth the frogs. Then to counter this, the Egyptians show that they can make frogs as well. Apparently though, the Egyptians aren't able to make frogs disappear though, so there efforts only compound the problem of too many frogs.

V8-11 Pharaoh relents finally and tells Aaron and Moses that the Hebrews may take a few days off to go and worship the Lord if they will make the frogs go away everywhere except in the river.

I love Moses line here “Kindly tell me when I am pray for you...”

Notice though that the active request isn't freedom, merely the ability to mark a holy day without expectation of labor.

V12-15 So all of the frogs die and they are piled into stinking heaps, but because Moses and Aaron responded so rapidly, Pharaoh decides that they have probably used up all their power and decides to renege on the deal.

V16-19 unlike the week noted between the first and second plagues, the amount of time elapsed between plagues isn't usually explicitly stated as we see here.

This time, all the dust motes of Egypt become gnats, which would be a lot of gnats! Also, the Egyptian priests are unable to replicate this one so they tell Pharaoh this is

truly a divine act but Pharaoh has decided to go toe-to-toe with the Hebrew god (remember Pharaoh himself is thought of as being god-like)
V20-23 So at least a day later, God tells Moses to warn Pharaoh of a plague of flies.

Honestly, why hasn't Pharaoh just had Aaron and Moses arrested and killed at this point? At the very least you would think he'd stop granting them audiences.

Also, this time God is showing that God can control all of creation because he promises to spare the areas where the Hebrew live from this plague. This will be a general pattern through the plagues, the Hebrews will be spared and the Egyptians will suffer.

Unlike the previous plagues, this time god does the work without Aaron (or Moses) doing anything.

V24-32 Again Pharaoh seems to relent, but first he says the Hebrews should worship in Egypt, but Moses disagrees and says that he worries that the Egyptians might cause them harm because Hebrew worship would offend the Egyptians.

Pharaoh agrees to a journey of three days and asks Moses to intervene on his behalf. Moses agrees but warns Pharaoh to not change his mind at the last minute as he did before.

But, of course, Pharaoh does renege on his deal and refuses to let the people go.

Exodus Chapter 9

This chapter tells of the fifth, sixth, and seventh plagues; (livestock sickness, boils, and thunder and hail).

V1-7 This time the livestock of the Egyptians suffers while that of the Hebrews does not, and though it's implied, the text does not tell of Moses meeting with Pharaoh nor of anything to do with Aaron.

V8-12 This time it is Moses and Aaron together who bring about God's plan by throwing the soot from a kiln into the air to make dust that causes boils when it lands on human or animal (presumably all the previous dust was used up to make the gnats). Realistically, of course, a single kiln wouldn't have sufficient dust to cover all of Egypt, but the key point is the power of God, not the practicality of the story.

In this case, Moses and Aaron do not warn Pharaoh, but Pharaoh is to know it is their doing.

Two things to note, this is the first time in the plague story that we see it is God who keeps hardening Pharaoh's heart each time he relents and decides to let the Hebrews depart – that was only the implication previously based on 4:21

The second is that this is the first of the plagues which actually directly afflicts humans

V13-21 Now God, through Moses, is directly confronting Pharaoh (and by extension, Pharaonic divinity) by reminding Pharaoh that God has ultimate authority over life and death.

God also restates that part of his purpose is instill, literally, the fear of God into the hearts of oppressive rulers everywhere.

We also see that plenty of Egyptians are taking Moses seriously

V22-26 At God's command, Moses stretches out his staff (not Aaron) and a tremendous storm of hail, thunder, and lightning is unleashed that causes immense widespread destruction everywhere – except where the Hebrews live.

V27-35 Pharaoh summons Moses and Aaron, and again relents and agrees to let them go and worship in the wilderness, even using language reminiscent of repentance.

It is interesting that Moses leaves the city before ending the plague. Several plagues were initiated within Pharaoh's presence but their ending isn't.

Moses, however, doesn't believe that Pharaoh is really repentant, and as it turns out, he is right, and Pharaoh's heart is hardened once more.

Exodus Chapter 10

Chapter 10 covers the 8th and 9th plagues; locusts and darkness

V1-2 God again repeats that his key motivation for prolonging the Egyptian's suffering is to increase human regard and respect for God.

V3-6 We were told in chapter 9 that some young crops remained unharmed by the hail, but now God, through Moses and Aaron, is warning that they too will be destroyed, in a kind of ironic reversal of the situation which brought the Hebrews to Egypt in the first place.

V7- 11 Finally, the royal officials implore Pharaoh to see reason and to relent for real.

Pharaoh seems to capitulate when asks Aaron and Moses to return, but he's not really agreeable and begins to haggle about which Hebrews might go.

So clearly Pharaoh believes that all of the Hebrews intend to leave and to not return. But Pharaoh, despite seeing the short term devastation of the plagues is still more concerned with the long term costs of losing the enforced labor the Hebrews provide.

Digression: This is not dissimilar to the situation in America after the revolution when nearly everyone recognized the conflict between the revolutions ideals of liberty and human equality and the reality of African slavery. Thomas Jefferson famously wrote of how slavery debased the owners along with the slaves. And yet, despite recognizing the evil of their situation, the slave owners chose to accept continuing slavery rather than imagining a different future more in line with their ideals. And that idea of putting up with oppression and the occasional blowback now in favor of a perceived long-term advantage still impacts race relations in America as well as our response to climate change.

V12-15 Pharaoh's begrudging decision to let the men go and worship is insufficient and God unleashes the plague of locusts to eat up even the young crops in the field as well as the fruit and nut trees.

V16-20 Pharaoh again seems to relent and begs to be delivered from the plague of locusts and when Moses asks, God does so blowing them into the Red Sea.

So despite the intransigence of the Pharaoh, each time he asks for forgiveness or for the lifting of the afflictions, God comes through and does so.

V21-23 With Pharaoh's heart again hardened, Moses stretches out his hands to blot out the sun for three days. We get the sense that this is a particular deep darkness with no star or moonlight.

V24-29 Pharaoh is almost there but he remains unwilling to risk losing the Hebrew slaves forever, so again the answer is no because Pharaoh's heart is hardened.

Pharaoh then tells Moses to not come back because if he does, he will be arrested and executed.

Moses seems to sense that this will be their last meeting and ominously agrees with Pharaoh they will never again meet.

Exodus Chapter 11

This chapter begins one of the foundational stories of Judaism, that of Passover. At this point God has unleashed a series of 9 “plagues” on Egypt (most of which didn’t affect the Israelites) and yet Pharaoh still refuses to accede the Israelites request for three days off to worship in the desert because he believes (rightly) that the Israelites will not return if allowed to go.

V1-3 God tells Moses that the day of deliverance will be arrived at with the next plague. Up until now, it wasn’t explicit how many “plagues” would unfold before this happened.

Two things of note here; the first is that Israelites have become either well-regarded or well-feared enough by the Egyptians that when the Israelites ask their neighbors for silver and gold, the Egyptians willingly hand it over.

The second is that the officials and nobles under Pharaoh, as well as the populace generally consider Moses a great and worthy person.

V4-8 Though it doesn’t say so at the beginning, this warning from Moses is delivered to Pharaoh, so presumably we are still in the same audience as at the end of chapter 10, which means that God is somehow communicating with Moses in real time as Moses is speaking with Pharaoh.

Here God lays out the severity of this plague and how nothing will be exempted from it in Egypt except the Israelites. In Hebrew, which is gendered, “firstborn” refers only to males.

V9-10 Again God reiterates that God has hardened Pharaoh’s heart in order that the extent of God’s power may be exposed

Exodus

Chapter 12

This chapter lays out how the Israelites are to mark the coming plague and then tells of the plague itself and Pharaoh's response.

V1-2 Traditionally, Passover is celebrated in the Hebrew Lunar month of Nisan, which usually falls sometime in March or April (Just like Easter!!)

Fun Fact: until the early modern period, the new year began in March. Pope Gregory XIII established the modern Gregorian calendar in 1582. However, England (and her colonies) didn't change calendars until 1752 because they were already Protestant and didn't follow the pope's decrees.

V3-10 Here the people are instructed on how to prepare the sacrificial lamb and commanded that no one should be left out due to poverty.

V11-13 These instructions clearly only apply to men, women don't gird their loins. They are also told that on this night God will carry out the "plague" mentioned in the last chapter that will cause the death of every firstborn male human and livestock throughout Egypt and that God will recognize the Hebrew homes by the blood which they were instructed to leave on their door frames.

V14-20 Here we turn to the second half of God's command to Israel; that moving forward, this night of the pass-over is to be remembered and talked about into the future in perpetuity. This makes sense since part of the reason God is doing all of this is to not only bring the Hebrews out of oppression but to also showcase the power and might of God, Israel's protector.

So let's step out of the story a minute and talk about the history of Passover. The earliest extra-Biblical mentions of Passover come in the Ptolemaic period (~300-100BCE) but the connection of the festival to the story of the exodus seems to have become concrete in the time of King Josiah of Judah (~600BCE) when he instituted a series of religious reforms after priests "found" the book of Deuteronomy while renovating the Temple.

Prior to this, the Pesach (Hebrew for Passover) seems to have been primarily a spring festival to appease God/the gods and ensure a good lambing season. It is around this time that Pesach becomes connected with the feast of unleavened bread.

It was under Josiah that Passover moved from a festival celebrated in individual homes to one marked wholly in the Jerusalem Temple.

It was only in the aftermath of the Jewish War and destruction of Israel by Rome in 70AD that the Passover once again moved into individual homes and emerged in the Passover Seder known today.

V21-28 Moses now repeats what God has told him to the Israelites and they begin to do as he says.

V29-32 The Lord strikes and Egypt is immersed in tragedy and grief causing the Pharaoh to cast out the Hebrews just as God had foretold.

V33-36 The Hebrews gather up their things and some of the Egyptians things as well and head off.

V37-42 The numbers of people here is staggeringly large and unlikely. 600K men would imply something like a total population of 2.4 million which would probably not be possible starting at only 70 people and over only 4 1/3 centuries.

Further, scholars estimate the total population possible in ancient Egypt along the entire length of the Nile to be only 3-4 million.

And importantly, 2+ million people wandering around in the near east for 40 years would likely have left some trace both historically and archaeologically, which is not the case.

So, assuming that some Hebrews did in fact successfully rise up against their Egyptian oppressors, there would have been significantly fewer of them than suggested here.

V43-51 Again, the festival of Passover is defined and this time we are told that aliens who are circumcised are able to take part in the festival are to be considered as one of the people. Clearly this rule is anachronistic since the escaping Hebrews themselves are slaves, it seems unlikely that the slaves would have their own slaves.

Exodus Chapter 13

This chapter picks up directly from chapter 12 and the slaughter of Egypt's firstborns, describing how God wishes the Israelites to remember this event and then ends by beginning the story of the journey through the wilderness.

V1-2 These verse really belong with the story in chapter 12, but here the slaughter of Egypt's firstborn is contrasted with the consecration of Israel's.

V3-7 Moses establishes the festival of unleavened bread, which eventually became conflated with Passover to bring about a single festival.

Abib is the ancient and original name of the month of Nisan; it was changed shortly after the Babylonian exile. Israel uses a lunar calendar whose months are Tishri, Cheshvan, Kislev, Tevet, Shevat, Adar, Nisan, Iyar, Sivan, Tammuz, Av, and Elul. Since a lunar year is shorter than the solar year, the Israelite calendar has leap years but unlike our leap years, based on the Roman calendar, ancient Israel added a leap month every so often.

V8-10 Moses tells the Israelites that the celebration is to be a perpetual one and uses metaphorical language concerning remembrance which is the origin of the Jewish practice of wearing Tefillin at prayer.



V11-16 Moses here goes into more detail concerning the consecration of the firstborns mentioned in verses 1 and 2

The firstborn lambs are meant as sacrifices. Because the priests don't eat donkeys though, they can be substituted with a lamb. However, if for some reason you can't give the lamb to the priests (redeem it) you must kill the lamb because it is God's and to not do so would be stealing from God and according to Leviticus, you must also pay the priests 120% of its value if you don't deliver the animal itself.

For firstborn male children, they don't get sacrificed of course, but one has to pay the priests as an obligation to God. Though it doesn't say how much here, but in Numbers the price is set at 5 shekels.

And this section ends with a similar mandate of remembrance as in vv9-10.

V17-18 Clearly God doesn't have too high expectations of the Israelites (which makes one wonder, perhaps, why God is upset with them later over the golden calf).

The way of the Philistines is anachronistic, since they wouldn't have been present yet, but basically it is referring to following the coastal plain and then cutting through the hill country into the Jordan valley.



God instead opts to take the long way to the either the Red Sea or perhaps the Reed Sea. The Hebrew Word *Yan Suph* is more properly translated as Reed Sea, and there is a lot of debate about which body of water is being identified. At any rate, God's plan is to take the roundabout path that requires the crossing of a large body of water.

V18-22 Moses collects Joseph's bones, as Joseph himself had requested back in Genesis. In the journey, God is manifested among the Israelites in the form of the pillars of cloud and fire to lead the Israelites day and night.

Exodus Chapter 14

This chapter offers the apex of the escape portion of the exodus epic, the destruction of Egypt's armies through God's actions.

V1-2 Apparently the Israelites are escaping too quickly so God has Moses turn back in order to bait the Egyptians to follow after them.

The locations of Pi hahiroth, Migdol, and Ba'al Zephon are unknown, though there is plenty of conjecture.

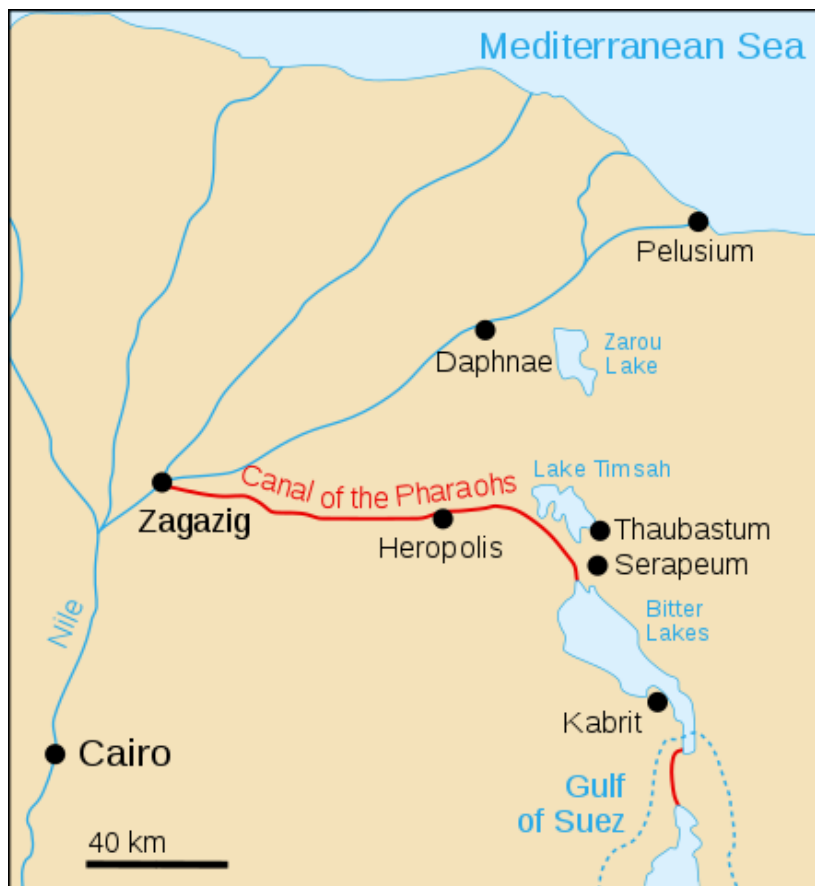
Migdol is the Hebrew word for tower, so it probably refers to a fortress encampment somewhere to the east of the Nile where Egyptians could defend their kingdom from invasion.

Ba'al Zephon sometimes referred to the Canaanite god of thunder so this could be a reference

used to mountain believed However, this located is

Pi- probably origin, Pi usually of" and mean

It seems we're area just of Suez



to a temple, or it sometimes was reference a in where it was said God lived. exactly where mountain was lost to us.

hahiroth is Egyptian in as a prefix means "house hahiroth could hills or mountains.

most likely that talking about an north of the Gulf which is a long

arm of the Red Sea that goes up between Egypt and Arabia. In ancient times there was a

series of lakes and marshes in this area as well as canal that gave the Egyptians access to the Red Sea from the Nile.

V3-4 Again, it is clearly stated that God's plan is as much about establishing a reputation for God's self as it is about Israel's escape from bondage.

I think this is a perspective we can challenge and call into question as followers of Jesus.

V5-9 This may represent Pharaoh understanding that the Israelites weren't going out for just three days to worship God, but were departing forever. No matter, his heart hardened once again, Pharaoh musters his mighty army and goes in pursuit of Israel.

V10-12 They've only just left and the Israelites are complaining about it and wishing they could return to the predictability of their bondage.

V13-14 Moses reassures them and even tells them that they won't even have to defend themselves.

V15-18 God is already annoyed at the feckless hearts of the Israelites and tells them to just keep going, but he tells Moses to divide the water to both hurry the progress of the Israelites but also set up the Egyptians for their destruction.

There are some allusions here to a creation myth not included in Genesis, but which was likely familiar to ancient Israelites (it is referenced by Isaiah and Job and in the Psalms) where the creation comes from God splitting a great sea serpent in half and drying out the primeval waters to make land for humans and animals to live on.

V19-20 The manifestation of God in the form of the pillars now moves to defend the Israelites.

V21-25 Unlike in the movie, the waters are separated by a strong wind and it takes hours (all night in fact) before the Israelites are able to get across.

Also, this description undermines the claim of how many people we're talking about here. If we assume over a million people (the text says 600,000 men) then we're talking about a column of people over 200 miles long. It would take far more than a day for the back of the line to walk 200 miles.

While the pillar had been holding back the Egyptians, it now allows them to proceed into the waterbed, but the wheels of the chariots get stuck, so it may have been dry enough to walk across but still too muddy for heavy horses and chariots.

V26-29 Now stuck in the mud, God directs Moses to restore the water to normal causing the whole of Pharaoh's army to drown.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cI-uzRi350g>

v30-31 In the face of God's amazing and miraculous defeat of Egypt, the people are amazed and awed and profess their belief in God and their trust in Moses (for now).

Exodus

Chapter 15

This chapter is comprised mostly of a poem known as the Song of the Sea (or sometimes the Song of Moses, though there is another more famous Song of Moses in Deuteronomy).

V1-19 It is likely that this poem is much older than the book of Exodus itself. The Hebrew is of an older style reminiscent of the period before the establishment of the kingdom under Saul.

Poetically, the poem would seem to have three sections, each with its own theme.

V1-7 here the emphasis is on God as redeemer or protector; focusing on God's triumph or victory over the Egyptian army

V8-12 This second section focuses on the primacy of God in the cosmology and God's authority over all natural phenomena. Note that it evidences Israel's evolution towards monotheism, imagining God as the superior of other gods, not as the only God.

V13-18 This final section concerns how God, as Israel's protector, affects the neighbors of Israel.

V19 is not, strictly speaking, part of the poem but it offers a kind of summary of the whole poem and acts as a kind of refrain. If this was a hymn we could imagine v19 as the part sung between each of the sections above.

The poem is somewhat anachronistic, suggesting that though it is very old, that it is not as old as the possible date for something like the Exodus. The poem mentions horseback riding, for which there is little evidence in Egypt before about 1220BCE; Egyptians used horses to draw chariots. Further the poem names the land of the Philistines who won't be in the vicinity of Canaan for some time, and it also tells of the establishment of Israel (and at least implicitly, Jerusalem as an Israelite city) as things God *has* done when, in the context of the story, they haven't happened yet.

V20-21 This is our first time being introduced to Miriam (at least by name) where we learn she is a prophet (this is the only verse in which she is so described). The

suggestion here is that the women are answering the men (or at least Moses) in the victory song as she begins with a version of the song's beginning. In Judges and 1Samuel, we see other examples of women leading the singing in response to military victories.

V22-25 Moses leads the people further east, though the exact locations of Shur and Marah are unknown to us. Marah is the Hebrew word for bitter and there are several very salty springs in the region.

And only four days after their victory over the Egyptians, the Hebrews are complaining again, this time over the lack of fresh water. In this case, they aren't punished but instead Moses is offered a piece of wood which turns the water potable.

V25-27 At this point God hasn't actually offered any statutes or commandments to follow, but perhaps it's just foreshadowing. At any rate the Hebrew word here translated as diseases is not the same as the one translated as plagues, so it's not clear which diseases we're talking about here.

Like Shur and Marah, the location of Elim is unknown to us, but many conjecture that we're talking about the east coast of the Gulf of Suez.

Exodus

Chapter 16

This chapter finds the Israelites complaining about provisions, God providing for their needs, and we get the first establishment of a sabbath day.

V1-3 45 days into the Exodus and again the Israelites are wishing they had stayed in bondage in Egypt.

The Wilderness of Sin, despite great alliteration is not related to the moral concept of sin (the Hebrew word for sin is pronounced khata), it's just the Hebrew name for this area whose location is unknown to us.

V4-5 God tells Moses that he will provide food for the people and also communicates that this will be a test of whether or not they follow the sabbath commandment even though that commandment has been given yet.

V6-8 Moses and Aaron tell the Israelites that they will once again be rescued by God, while also admonishing the people for complaining about God when they grouse about the leadership of Moses and Aaron.

V9-12 Moses tries to bring people to a better appreciation of God and they are awed by the appearance of God's "glory" in the sky, which is apparently something different than the pillars of cloud and fire which represented God's presence previously.

God goes even further than in verse 4 and promises bread *and* meat.

V13 Quails come in large numbers in evening time and, presumably, the Israelites kill them for dinner.

V14- 21 In the morning, something flaky, is on the ground and the Israelites ask "what is it?" which in Hebrew is *man hu*, which is the likely etymology of manna, which it won't be named until later.

Presumably, the manna is made up into a dough, like flour, and made into a bread. It is elsewhere described as being like coriander seeds which are small round beads like couscous or tapioca pearls.

Miraculously, there is always just exactly enough for everyone, no one gets an extra share and no one goes without. Some try to hoard it or save it rather than trust in God to provide, but they are undermined because it cannot be stored.

Omer:. Elsewhere, an omer is defined as one tenth of an ephah, and an ephah is a measurement equal to about 22 liter or about 5 $\frac{3}{4}$ gallons – so a lot. Sometimes, an omer is also defined as a sheaf of grain rather than a specific volume – but that wouldn't be very much.

V22-26 Here we finally get the establishment of the sabbath law and an exception to the no-storing-manna law.

V27-30 Some people defy the new law, which makes God angry and in response the people begin to stay put.

V31-36 We are offered a little detail on what exactly manna was like, and we get *another* exception to the no-storing-manna rule, a jar is to be kept *forever* as a reminder of God's beneficence. And again, we get a curious anachronism because the jar is to be kept by the covenant (i.e., the stone tablets of the Law), which haven't actually been created yet.

Exodus Chapter 17

This short chapter is divided into two episodes; in the first the Israelites ask God, what have you done for me lately, and in the second, the Israelites are attacked for the first time.

V1-2 The journey is being led by God who, presumably, is still taking the indirect route (if only they knew). A better translation might be there wasn't *enough* water.

Moses again reminds the people that it is God, not Moses, who is leading the journey.

The location of Rephidim, like every else in the story is unknown to us, but probably represents one of a number of oases in the Sinai peninsula.

V3-4 Moses, in turn, complains to God, and honestly sounds a little exasperated with God's choices as well.

V5-7 Moses goes on a little further to Horeb, the same mountain where Moses saw the burning bush where God again promises to *appear* to Moses to guide him to where He shall create a spring with enough water for all the people.

Interestingly, at the Nile, the staff was used to deny water to the Egyptians but here it is used to provide water for the Hebrews.

Massah means test and Meribah means quarrel

V8-10 The Amelekites were a local people who probably were the ones who controlled the oasis at Rephidim and didn't appreciate the Israelites being there and using it.

This is the first we hear of Joshua, who we will definitely hear more from later and Hur, who we will not.

V11-13 Unlike at the water crossing, God does not unilaterally defeat Israel's enemies but rather God's favor is only present as long as Moses can hold up his walking stick.

V14-16 Moses builds an altar and presumably offers a sacrifice and God vows eternal conflict and genocide with the Amelekites.

Reminder: it was the Amelekites that God told king Saul to utterly wipe out, and when Saul showed some mercy to them God decided to depose Saul

And in the book of Esther, the big bad, Haman, who tries to convince the Persian king to kill all the Jews is said to be descended from the Amelekites.

Exodus Chapter 18

Chapter 18 revolves around the reunion of Moses and Jethro, his father-in-law who has arrived just in time to offer some good and needed advice.

V1-4 Just a reminder, Moses' father-in-law is also known as Reuel (friend of God) but here we continue with Jethro (Jethro is probably derived from the Hebrew word for "overflowing" and probably relates to his generosity in hospitality). He has several other names as well as recorded in other Biblical books.

The term "sent away" usually refers to divorce elsewhere in the Hebrew scriptures, though this is the first we've heard of it. Last we heard from Moses' family, they were on the journey with him to Egypt (4:20).

Also, last we checked in with the family, there was only the one son, Gershom so at some point Moses and Zipporah had a second son, Eliezer (Eli = God, ezer = help) who judging by the comment about his name, was born in Egypt.

Alas, we won't be hearing more of them after this.

V5-7 the mountain of God is sometimes Horeb, sometimes Sinai, though the last chapter said they were near Horeb when Moses brought forth water from the rock.

V8-12 Moses and Jethro catch up and later Jethro makes offerings to God, while acknowledging God as the greatest (most powerful) of all the gods.

A burnt offering is allowed to be wholly consumed in the sacrificial fire
A sacrifice only burns up the blood while the meat is eaten in a celebratory feast, which in this case is joined by Aaron and all the elders (who are they?) so Jethro clearly brought several animals for the sacrifice.

V13-16 The next day, Moses sits on a "throne" while all the people who have complaints to be addressed to quarrels to be settled come to him for resolution.

I love Jethro's response on seeing all this "Why do you sit alone, while all the people stand around you from morning to evening?"

V17-20 Jethro gives some practical advice, basically maybe you should write down some rules and teach them to the people so they can manage their own affairs more.

V21-23 Jethro further suggests that maybe Moses should set up a hierarchy of governance so that minor affairs could be handled by trustworthy assistants, leaving only the most difficult cases for Moses. Which will have a salutary effect on Moses' well being but will also make so that the people don't have stand around all day waiting for Moses' judgments.

V24-27 Moses thinks this is such a good idea that he implements it immediately and his work being done, Jethro departs for home.

In Deuteronomy 1:9-18, the story of this division of labor is different, there it comes from Moses alone and God endorses the plan.

Exodus

Chapter 19

Chapter 19 has the Israelites on the move again, this time to Mt Sinai where God prepares to give Moses the tablets of the Law.

V1-2 Three months have passed so far, and Israel arrives at Sinai, at the base of the mountain. We may recall that the previous chapter told of how the Israelites left Rephidim and journeyed to Horeb – this may be a slightly different version of the journey already told of in the previous chapter.

It isn't really clear whether Horeb and Sinai are different places or the same since the book, as we have it, is cobbled together from different ancient sources that may have used different names (We see the same in the New Testament, where the four gospels diverge, even on the names of the twelve disciples).

V3-6 God calls on Moses to come before the Lord on the mountain and gives Moses a message to pass along that reinforces the covenants made with the Patriarchs earlier.

Essentially, Israel will be held to a more rigorous standard than other nations and though it doesn't say so here, our Christian understanding is that this is done so that Israel may be a positive example in the world and so that it will be worthy, eventually, to have the son of God be among its members.

V7-9a Moses relates God's message to the people, who commit themselves to the covenant. God then says that what they will soon see happening on the mountain will be a sign of God's communing with Moses.

V9b-11 God promises to be manifest to the people once they have prepared themselves and been consecrated – which means to be set aside for a holy purpose.

V12-15 As is often the case, there is a catch to God's plan. God will descend on the mountain so that the people can be sure of God's presence (what happened to the pillars of fire and cloud?) *but* the people can't come too close, in fact, they should stay away from the mountain altogether until God is prepared. And if any are overcome with curiosity, they should be executed, but at some remove – no one should actually sully their hands. They can only come on to the mountain after they hear a trumpet blast (would the fleeing Israelites have brought musical instruments or is this an angelic trumpet?)

V16-20 When all is ready, God descends upon the mountain and all are able to see the signs and to see Moses “speaking” with God.

It has been noted that the description of God’s presence sounds a lot like a volcano erupting. There are several active volcanoes in the Arabian peninsula near to where many scholars believe Midian was (Jethro’s home).

V21-25 Moses is directed again to make sure no one comes any closer to the heights of the mountain because they will surely be harmed (it’s not clear if the harm would come as a punishment or just an expected consequence of getting too close to God) but God does want **Aaron to join them**.

V24 this verse comes off a little odd because either Moses is speaking to someone other than God or God refers to God’s self here in the 3rd person.

Exodus Chapter 20

This chapter begins God’s giving of the Law, which actually continues until the end of chapter 31.

V1-17 The Ten Commandments

There are two different versions of this giving of the law, here in Exodus and again in Deuteronomy.

The very idea of their being *ten* commandments is a later gloss on the laws given at Sinai here. There are difference between Christian traditions as well as between Christians and Jews.

From my Jewish learning:

“The division of the commandments themselves is not at all certain. There are 13 sentences in the accepted Jewish version of the Ten Commandments (17 in the Christian), but it is difficult to ascertain with certainty from the text itself what comprises the first commandment, the second, and so forth. For while there are 13 mitzvot [commandments] to be found in the text, their allocation to the Ten Commandments can be done in a variety of ways. Thus there are different traditions.”

Exodus 20	Deuteronomy 5	BCP Catechism	Small Catechism
<p>²“I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery; ³you shall have no other gods before me.</p>	<p>6 ‘I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery; 7 you shall have no other gods before[a] me.</p>	<p>To love and obey God and to bring others to know him;</p>	<p>You shall have no other gods.</p>
<p>4 “You shall not make for yourself an idol, whether in the form of anything that is in heaven above or that is on the earth beneath or that is in the water under the earth. 5 You shall not bow down to them or serve them, for I the Lord your God am a jealous God, punishing children for the iniquity of parents to the third and the fourth generation of those who reject me 6 but showing steadfast love to</p>	<p>8 “ ‘You shall not make for yourself an idol, whether in the form of anything that is in heaven above or that is on the earth beneath or that is in the water under the earth. 9 You shall not bow down to them or serve them, for I the Lord your God am a jealous God, punishing children for the iniquity of parents to the third and fourth generation of those who reject me 10 but showing steadfast love to the thousandth generation[b] of</p>	<p>To put nothing in the place of God;</p>	

the thousandth generation of those who love me and keep my commandments.	those who love me and keep my commandments.		
7 “You shall not make wrongful use of the name of the Lord your God, for the Lord will not acquit anyone who misuses his name.	11 “ ‘You shall not make wrongful use of the name of the Lord your God, for the Lord will not acquit anyone who misuses his name.	To show God respect in thought, word, and deed;	You shall not misuse the name of the LORD your God.
8 “Remember the Sabbath day and keep it holy. 9 Six days you shall labor and do all your work. 10 But the seventh day is a Sabbath to the Lord your God; you shall not do any work—you, your son or your daughter, your male or female slave, your livestock, or the alien resident in your towns. 11 For in six days the Lord made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that is in them, but rested the seventh day; therefore the Lord blessed the Sabbath day and consecrated it.	12 “ ‘Observe the Sabbath day and keep it holy, as the Lord your God commanded you. 13 Six days you shall labor and do all your work. 14 But the seventh day is a Sabbath to the Lord your God; you shall not do any work—you, or your son or your daughter, or your male or female slave, or your ox or your donkey, or any of your livestock, or the resident alien in your towns, so that your male and female slave may rest as well as you. 15 Remember that you were a slave in the land of Egypt, and the Lord your God brought you out from there with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm; therefore the Lord your God commanded you to keep the Sabbath day.	And to set aside regular times for worship, prayer, and the study of God's ways.	Remember the Sabbath day by keeping it holy.
12 “Honor your father and your mother, so that your days may be long in the land that the Lord your God is giving you.	16 “ ‘Honor your father and your mother, as the Lord your God commanded you, so that your days may be long and that it may go well with you in the land that the Lord your God is giving you.	To love, honor, and help our parents and family; to honor those in authority, and to meet their just demands;	Honor your father and your mother.
3 “You shall not murder	17 “ ‘You shall not murder.	To show respect for the life God has given us; to work and pray for peace; to bear no malice, prejudice, or hatred in our hearts; and to be kind to all the creatures of God;	You shall not murder.
14 “You shall not commit adultery.	18 “ ‘Neither shall you commit adultery.	To use our bodily desires as God intended;	You shall not commit adultery.

15 "You shall not steal.	19 " "Neither shall you steal.	To be honest and fair in our dealings; to seek justice, freedom, and the necessities of life for all people; and to use our talents and possessions as ones who must answer for them to God;	You shall not steal.
16 "You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor.	20 " "Neither shall you bear false witness against your neighbor.	To speak the truth, and not to mislead others by our silence;	You shall not give false testimony against your neighbor.
17 "You shall not covet your neighbor's house; you shall not covet your neighbor's wife, male or female slave, ox, donkey, or anything that belongs to your neighbor."	21 " "Neither shall you covet your neighbor's wife. " "Neither shall you desire your neighbor's house, or field, or male or female slave, or ox, or donkey, or anything that belongs to your neighbor.' "	To resist temptations to envy, greed, and jealousy; to rejoice in other people's gifts and graces; and to do our duty for the love of God, who has called us into fellowship with him.	You shall not covet your neighbor's house.
			You shall not covet your neighbor's wife, or his manservant or maidservant, his ox or donkey, or anything that belongs to your neighbor.

We usually depict the ten commandments as being on two tablets with five on each, however that is not in the text. The text itself does not tell us how they were written down or even that there are ten – these are ideas imposed upon the text later. However, people have generally thought of them as ten, and often in two groups of five.

Nevertheless, it does seem clear that there are two groups of commandments here, one concerning our relationship with God and another concerning our relationships with one another.

From My Jewish Learning”

“Some commentators speculate that the commandments range in a descending order from Divine matters to human matters, and within each group from higher to lower values. In this scenario, duties to God come first, the obligation to worship God alone precedes that of treating His name with reverence, and both precede the symbolic piety of Sabbath rest. Respect for parental authority naturally follows respect for God. The purely ethical commandments are arranged in a hierarchal form: life, the family, right of possession, reliability of public statements. The last commandment, the ban in desires

arising from jealousy, deals with what is most ethically sensitive, and protects against the infringing of the other ethical commandments.

The philosopher Abraham ben Chiyya, after placing the first commandment apart as comprising all the others, divided the other nine according to the commandments of thought, speech, and action, and according to relations between human and God, human and his family, and human and human, reaching the following classification

Relations between:	Man & God	Human & Family	Human & Human
Thought	Second Command: “Thou shalt have no other God”– fear of God.	Fifth Command: “Honor thy father and thy mother.”	Tenth Command: “Thou shalt not covet.”
Speech	Third Command: “Thou shalt not take the name of the Lord in vain.”	Sixth Command: “Thou shalt not murder,” especially one’s family.	Ninth Command: “Thou shalt not bear false witness.”
Action	Fourth Command: “Remember the Sabbath Day.”	Seventh Command: “Thou shalt not commit adultery.”	Eighth Command: “Thou shalt not steal.”

A couple of things to note here, because they’ll be important later. One is that even though v24 of chapter 19 had God ask that Aaron accompany Moses, he is not present here. The second is that, at this point, no tablets have been made. We tend to think of the tablets containing only the ten commandments, but that is not explicit in the text.

V18-21 The logistics here are a little confusing as it seems as if Moses is going up and down from the mountain, and yet in other places the text suggests that Moses is up on the mountain and out of touch for a good long while.

What’s most important here though is that the Israelites are truly terrified of whatever is happening at the top of this mountain.

V22—26 God gives some additional commandments beyond the first few (the first of *many* to follow) and here God says that God is honored best from the elements of creation, with as little human artifice as possible.

Exodus

Chapter 21

As already mentioned, the next dozen chapters or so are, essentially, law books, laying out codes of conduct regulating both civic and religious behavior. Most of these laws are somewhat anachronistic to the story as they deal with how to live in a settled agricultural society rather than governing a people constantly on the move. Historically, it is likely that these law codes were developed later and then placed within the context of the Exodus story to give them added weight.

Chapter 21 deals with what we would consider civil law, property rights (both human and material) and violence.

Recalling the sixth commandment, on the prohibition of murder, we see here that murder *is* the better translation over and against kill as the penalty for most violations is death.

V1-11 These laws concern Hebrew slaves. In ancient societies, people would sell themselves, usually to repay a debt, though often the term of the sale was for a limited time; such as we might think of indentured servitude. In this case, the allowable limits differentiate between women and men.

V2-4 Male terms of service are limited to six years, at the end of which the formerly enslaved returns to his *status quo* status at the time of the sale. The flip side being that what already belonged to the buyer remains the buyers (ie, the “wife” provided).

V5-6 However, there is a loophole whereby the purchased man may choose lifetime enslavement if he wishes to stay with a woman provided by the purchaser.

The scar that would remain would be a sign of his diminished status in society. It's a little obscure, but there's probably a link to the likelihood of blood on the doorpost and the blood at the Passover, a kind of symbol that the master of the house provides protection to the enslaved.

V7-11 Whereas the first section mainly dealt with the rights of the purchaser, in the case of enslaved Hebrew women, the rules are split between the rights of the purchaser and the rights of the purchased woman.

- The purchase of female slaves is permanent, there is no possibility of indenture though she can be returned for a full refund*
- Women may not be sold to foreigners (we are centuries away from Jewish matrilineal descent, but this is surely a genesis of that idea.)
- This makes plain that there is little difference between a dowry and purchasing a slave.
- If man purchases a woman to be his wife and he takes on additional wives, he is obligated to treat them equally and if he doesn't she can be freed.* However, there isn't really anyway to enforce such a law unless her family presses the issue since a woman on her own would have been a very difficult status to have.

The law code switches now from regulating the sale of Hebrews to securing communal peace through the limitation of violence. Despite what we many believe, the pre-modern world was considerably more violent than our own. Data is hard to find for very ancient societies, but medieval murder rates in Europe were about 50-70 per 100,000. Today's US murder rate is 7-8 per 100,000 while the murder rate in the UK is ~1 per 100,000.

V12-26 A prevailing ethos here is that the punishment is meant to fit the crime. I would also note that laws usually come into existence to address actual perceived problems, which suggests to us, again, that ancient cultures offered many opportunities to face violence. Also note that ancient Israel, like almost all societies prior to the early modern period, did not have a police force or really anyone whose job it was to regulate and deter crime. Assigning guilt and carrying out punishments were largely left to the local communities to figure out.

V12-17 Capital punishment is prescribed for murder, dishonoring mother and father, and theft. There is also a recognition between murder and manslaughter (unintended death).

V18-27 largely prescribe commensurate punishments to deliver compensation for actual losses with laws governing treatment of slaves being something of outliers. It is odd that regularly beating your slave is ok, and that the "punishment" for injuring one is left ambiguous unless the punishment results in a permanent disability, in which case they are freed. However, this likely isn't as merciful as it might sound, since doing so just means that the slaveholder no longer is required to provide for their property, but that they are free to beg, starve, or find someone else to buy them.

V28-36 largely deal with farm animals. Unlike our modern farms, ancient society relied on commons – lands which were shared by the whole community, as places to keep and

feed farm animals. In this case, one's animals would be interacting with other's animals and with other people on a regular and ongoing basis.

V29-30 Accidents are ok, but problematic animals are not. Also, the death penalty is a possibility, but a fine (i.e ransom) is also allowable.

V32 slaves are worth less than free people, so their deaths result in a fine by default. A shekel would be about 14grams of silver or about \$300 today.

Exodus

Chapter 22

Chapter 22 is divided into two sections; the first mostly covers more rules concerning farm animals and then a second section covering seemingly random situations between community members.

V1-15 These laws are meant to govern communal relations and access to the commons. These laws deal largely with economic loss and the need to “make whole” the party who has suffered a loss, while also acknowledging that sometimes “stuff” just happens and no one is to blame.

When they say “brought before God” it means brought to be judged by religious authorities

The issue with when its ok to kill a thief is probably based on an assumption that it is ok to defend yourself in your own home but that a thief caught in the daytime means being caught well after the crime was committed and when there is no longer a presumption of danger on the part of the homeowner.

V16-17 There is a presumption that non-virgin women are un-marriageable at work here. As well, this doesn't seem to be talking about rape.

V18 Sorcery was considered to be messing with very dark forces that were definitely bad. However, it is a somewhat misogynistic rule that was likely used against woman who chose to not conform to societal expectations.

V19 Bestiality, like all instances where sexual relations involve an inability of one party to consent, is a real evil.

V20 Just a reminder that the Israelites hadn't taken up strict monotheism yet, and this issue with other gods is something that pops up regularly in the Hebrew scriptures.

V21-24 A very strong statement in support for caring for the most vulnerable members of society.

V25-27 Here we see a pretty clear condemnation of lending for profit or taking advantage of other's needs.

V28-31 God reminds God's people that the covenant lays obligations on them.

V30 We see the origin of the practice of circumcision on the 8th day and presumably, for animals, they are meant as a sacrifice of thanksgiving.

Exodus

Chapter 23

Chapter 23 is also divided into two sections, with the first governing civic obligations and the second reiterating the promise of settlement in a land set aside for them by God.

V1-3 These verses flesh out the commandment against bearing false witness

V4-5 This is a reminder to not let adverse human relationships interfere with the obligations to God's creation.

V6-8 These verses build on vv1-3, in their expansion of the 9th commandment.

V9 Again, a very strong statement in support for caring for the most vulnerable members of society (and a repeat of 22:21)

V10-13 An expansion on the 4th commandment, concerning Sabbath.

V14-19 These three festivals would remain as important celebrations and the impetus for pilgrimages for a thousand years and only fully ceased when the Roman destroyed Israel and levelled Jerusalem. All three, though transformed, have remained part of modern Judaism.

The Festival of Unleavened Bread merged with Passover and is now known as just Passover and is focused on the experience of the exodus from Egypt

The Festival of Weeks has become the festival of Shavuot, and is focused on the revelation of the law to Moses. It is a summer festival marked by family and community gatherings and the reading of the ten commandments in synagogues.

The Festival of Booths is known as the Sukkot, and it is a seven day festival that also commemorates the exodus, focusing on Israel's dependence on God.

In Christianity, Passover and Shavuot coincide with Easter and Pentecost.

V20-33 God makes some rather grand promises here for Israel's future. Most people equate the presence of an angel to lead them with the presence of the columns of cloud and fire mentioned earlier. In early Hebrew scriptures, angels are sometimes defined as individual beings and sometimes as something more akin to the Holy Spirit, a kind of manifestation of God's power on earth. The word for angel in Hebrew is Mal'akh, which literally means "one who is sent" and is not used exclusively for divine beings.

The promise of conquest here does not concur with the description offered in Joshua.

This definition of Israel's extent has yet to be realized, but it's promise is one of the things that propels right-wing extremism in modern Israel and its' promise of "greater Israel that would encompass not only modern Israel, but also Lebanon, Jordan, and parts of Egypt, Syria, and Iraq.

Exodus

Chapter 24

In this chapter we get an interlude from the divine law-giving, while Moses goes and gives a bloody status update to the people.

V1-2 God invites Moses, his brother, and his brothers two oldest sons along with seventy elders (70 is a number which seems to signify “completeness” in the scriptures) to come up on the mountain, though not directly into the presence of God to worship.

V3 Moses tells the people all of the laws that God has commanded, so far, and they agree to be bound by them.

This agreement is, I think, very important. Throughout the scriptures, God looks for consent and refrains from compelling people to do things. Which is not to say that God isn't occasionally heavy-handed in his persuasions; but at the end of the day, people must willingly choose the way of God. We are not automatons or robots, our lives are not pre-programmed; our free-will is preserved.

Jesus, I think, confirms this. He is tempt-able, he can refuse to go to the cross – both of these are presented as *choices* Jesus makes of his own free-will which also shows us that we too can live lives much closer to God's hopes for us than we probably do.

V4 Here, it is Moses who writes down the laws that have been given so far, which seems to include the Ten Commandments.

It isn't explicitly stated on what media Moses writes the laws. Presumably “write” would mean something other than stone, which is “carved.” Two other possibilities are clay and lead. Archaeologists have found ancient tablets from more than 3 thousand years ago, written in proto-Hebrew in those materials.

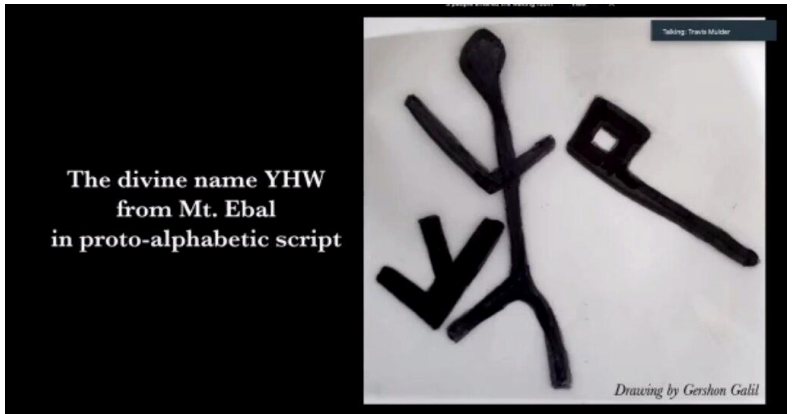


Clay cuneiform tablet from ~1800BC found in Iraq which is a kind of Rosetta stone with text in Akkadian and Amoritic (a Hebrew precursor)

A "curse tablet" made of lead, found on Mt Ebal in Israel from ~1200BC written in very ancient Hebrew characters.

𐤀𐤁𐤁𐤀 Hebrew ~ 900BC

יהוה Modern Hebrew



V4-8 This passage describes a feast and a purification ritual. The burnt offerings are for God, (i.e., nothing remains) and the sacrificial offerings are for the human participants to eat. Blood was considered a purifying element, though there aren't too many other examples of it being splashed on people that come to mind. However, we are probably all familiar with language in scripture about the purifying or atoning characteristics of blood.

Blood also figures prominently in the sacrifices associated with treaties in the ancient near East, and we've already seen examples of this in the Abrahamic covenant with the splitting of the various animals in half. This is similar in that the blood is placed on both parties to the agreement, God (via the altar), and the people. Much of the descriptions of covenants in the Hebrew Scriptures is very similar to treaty ceremonies in the same era.

V9-11 After the festival and covenant rituals, the group goes up the mountain and they, apparently, are able to see God ("beheld") or at least they were able to see his feet, even though earlier in v1-2, it is clearly stated that God did not intend for anyone other than Moses to come so near. This is probably an example of different versions of this story being woven together.

V12-14 Verse 12 seems to pick up where verse 2 left off since now it is God who promises to give Moses the written law (on stone) rather than Moses writing it down as in verse 4. Also, we see the return of Joshua, who back in ch. 17 had led the warriors against the Amalekites, but who had not been mentioned in vv5-11.

V15-18 Moses (and Joshua?) enter into the cloud which is the manifestation of God and he remains on the mountain for 40 days and nights, which is a frequent expression for the amount of time necessary for humans to ready themselves for something God is doing. We see it in the story of the ark, here (and in Deuteronomy telling the same story), it is the amount of time Goliath challenges Israel before David defeats him, it is the amount of time Elijah fasts before calling Elisha and delivering his prophecies, it is the amount of time Jonah travels through Nineveh preaching its destruction, and, of course, it is the amount of time Jesus is tempted in the desert while fasting.

Exodus Chapter 25

Moses is back with God and receiving commandments again, all of which relate to worship. In fact, this chapter, along with the next five are continuous dialogue from God describing how worship to God should be done. Many of the items and practices described here would pertain to the First Temple, though in the context of Exodus, God is describing a kind of portable temple. The First Temple won't be built until after the establishment of the kingdom of Israel, around 1000 BC.

V1-9 God starts with the stewardship message and tells Moses to invite (again with the free will) the Israelites who are compelled by the heart to give, to give items needed for worship worthy of God.

V10-22 The first item to be described is the ark of the covenant whose purpose God says is to be container for the covenant (Fun fact the word translated as ark here, *aron*, is not the same as the one translated as ark in the story of Noah *tevat*)

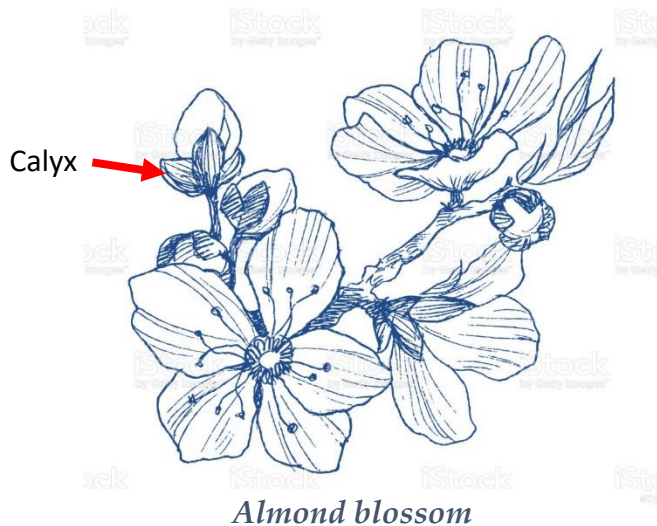
A cubit is the length of a forearm, so about 18" so the ark is roughly four feet long, two feet wide, and two feet high

The next item described is the mercy seat, which is the lid of the Ark of the Covenant. Note that since it is "closer to God" than the ark itself it is to be made with pure gold and not just gold plate.

By this description, basically the covenant and its lid are a kind of throne for God, who will "sit" above it when present with the Israelites.



V23-25 The next item of worship is to be the lampstand, or menorah. It is also to be made of pure gold, a talent's worth, so 30-50kg of gold (65-110lbs).



A depiction of the Menorah from the Roman Arch of Titus (ca 74CE) showing the Romans taking it away from the Temple as part of the destruction of Jerusalem in 70 AD





Reconstruction of the menorah of the Temple in Jerusalem, created by the Temple Institute of Israel

Exodus Chapter 26

Chapter 26 details the construction of the Tabernacle, a kind of portable temple. The Hebrew word translated as tabernacle is *mishkan*, which means “dwelling.”

V1-14 The tabernacle is created by layering different fabrics over a wooden frame to make something that looks a little bit like a quonset hut. The description here begins by describing the fabric coverings going from the innermost layer to the outermost.

The innermost layer is made of Linen in three colors woven together, blue, purple and crimson, with images of cherubim woven in as well.

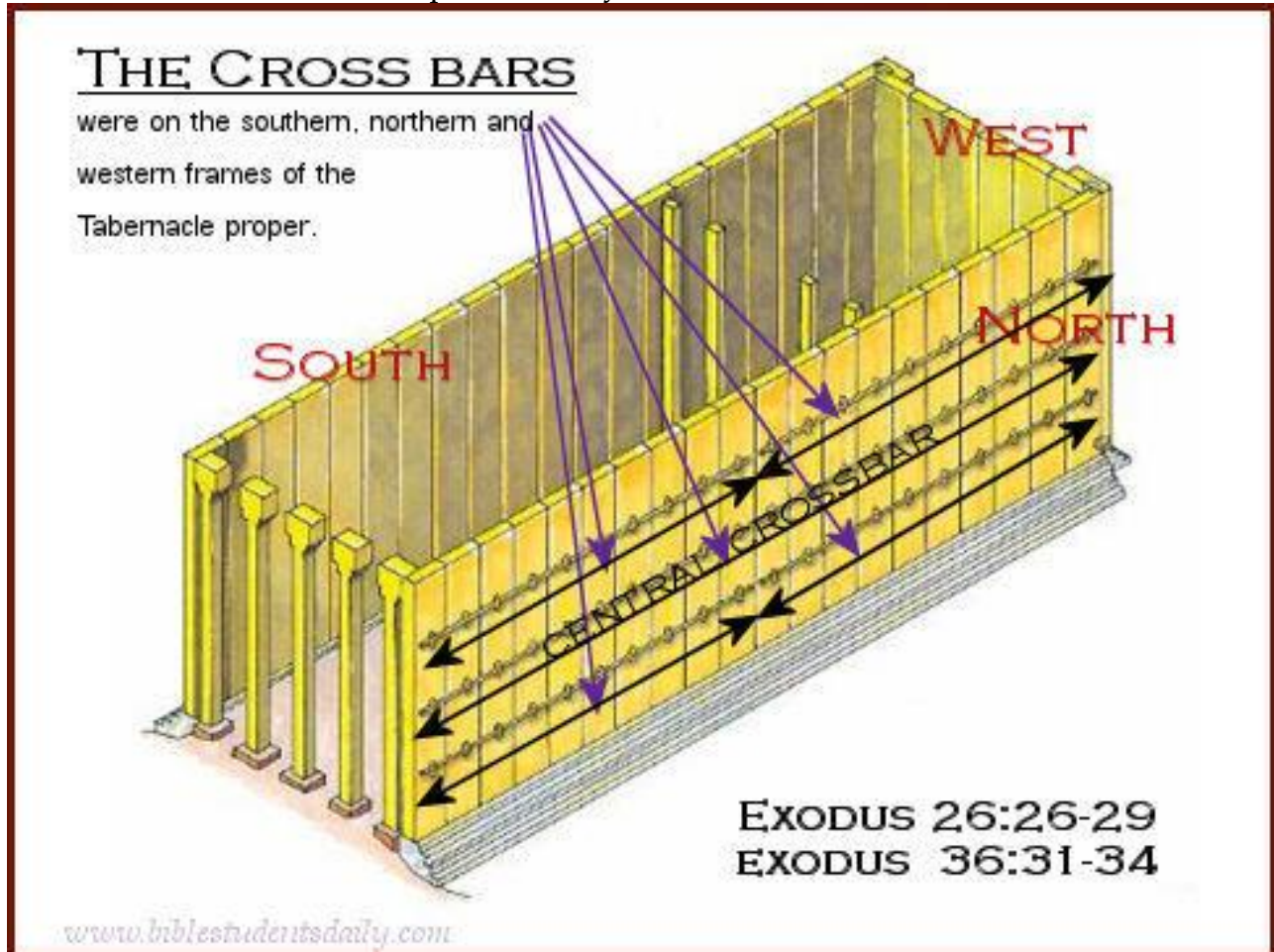
The second layer is made of goats hair, probably felted similar to Bedouin tents today.

The third layer is made of tanned ram’s skin (i.e., leather) – the Hebrew word implies that it was red in color.

The fourth layer is made of fine leather – apparently not from sheep or goats though. There’s actually been a wonderful diversity of translations of the Hebrew word used here “Tachash;” everything from badger to manatee.



V15-30 The wooden frames are made of acacia wood and covered in gold and rest on silver bases to allow them to stand upright and be joined together. They were also supported by cross bars going up the height of the frames. The dimensions mentioned here would mean an interior space of 18' by 45.'



V31 -36 The final piece of the structure is two curtains. An interior curtain to divide the space into two rooms (the holy space and the most holy – v33) and another curtain for the entrance on the east side. (the western end is covered by the three outer layers of fabrics).

The ark of the covenant would be kept in the “most holy” while the Table for the Bread of Presence and the Lampstand (menorah) would be in the holy space along with items not described yet.

THE TABERNACLE TENT

The entire tent was 45 feet (13.7 m) long, 15 feet (4.6 m) wide, and 15 feet (4.6 m) high. It was a wooden skeletal structure, overlaid with gold, with no solid roof or front wall (Ex. 26:15–29). Five wooden bars (overlaid with gold) passed through rings attached to each frame (Ex. 26:26–30).

The Most Holy Place was a 15-foot (4.6-m) cube, containing only the ark of the covenant (Ex. 25:10–22; 37:1–9). It was here that Yahweh would descend to meet with his people in a cloud theophany (divine appearance). The high priest could enter only once a year, on the Day of Atonement (see note on Heb. 9:7).

The framed structure was covered by four layers of cloth and skin (Ex. 26:1–14).

The table for the bread of the Presence (Ex. 25:23–30)

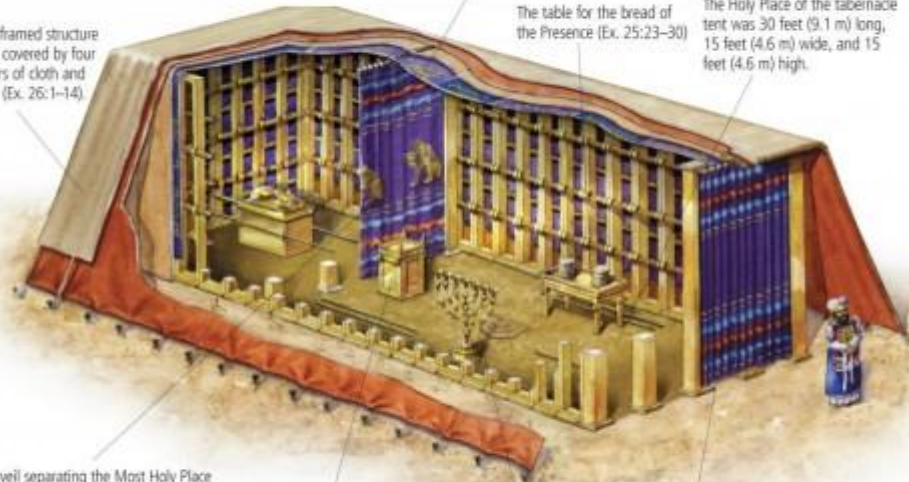
The Holy Place of the tabernacle tent was 30 feet (9.1 m) long, 15 feet (4.6 m) wide, and 15 feet (4.6 m) high.

The veil separating the Most Holy Place from the Holy Place was made from blue, purple, and scarlet dyed yarns woven with fine twined linen and embroidered with cherubim (Ex. 26:31–33); it hung on four golden pillars.

The altar of incense (Ex. 30:1–5; 37:25–29)

The golden lampstand (Ex. 25:31–40; 37:17–24)

The veil that formed the entrance to the tabernacle was similar to the veil separating the Holy Place from the Most Holy Place, except that cherubim were not embroidered on it. It was suspended on five golden pillars (Ex. 26:36–37).



Exodus Chapter 27

The design specifications for the Tabernacle continue with descriptions of an altar and an outer courtyard.

V1-8 The altar is basically a large (7.5' square) bronze grill for cooking the sacrifices. The altar is not in the tent but outside in a courtyard.



V9-19 The tent of meeting is surrounded by a fabric wall hung from bronze pillars , with another curtain across the front made of blue, purple, and crimson yarns.



V20-21 The lampstand is meant to use olive oil as fuel and to burn at all times and to be tended by Aaron and his sons – this is the beginning of the link between Aaron's descendants and the Israelite priesthood as we shall see in the next chapter.

Exodus

Chapter 28

Chapter 28 sets up the priesthood and gives design directions for the priestly vestments.

V1 "God" establishes the Aaronic priesthood, that is a priesthood determined by ancestry.

V2-5 The priestly vestments are enumerated, and it is to be the task of the most skilled artisans to make them. There are six items:

Tunic – a long shirt that hung at least to the knees

Robe – to be worn over the tunic

Turban – a head covering

Sash – the kind that goes around the waist as a belt, not the kind worn in beauty pageants

Ephod - an ornamental vest or apron

Breast piece – a decorative piece attached to the ephod

The color scheme is similar to that of the Tabernacle itself, blue, purple, crimson plus gold

V6-14 the Ephod

Made of fine twisted linen, blue, purple and crimson and on each shoulder an onyx gemstone engraved with the names of Jacob's sons*, six on each stone

V15-30 the Breastplate of Judgement

Another fine cloth piece with attached gemstones and some pockets for carrying the umin and thurmin.

It is attached to the chains of the ephod which hang down from the shoulders.

Like the onyx stones, 12 gemstones are attached to the breastpiece and are engraved with the names of Jacob's sons*

The umin and thurmin are used for divination and seem to have been engraved stones, not unlike dice which the priests used to ask God questions and get answers.

*Or maybe the 12 tribes – they aren't exactly the same

V31-35 the Robe

The robe is blue, and the description suggests a single piece of cloth that is put on over the head – more like a poncho than a bathrobe. Little gold bells are attached to the bottom hem and there is a suggestion that noise of the bells protect the wearer when in the presence of God.

V36-38 The turban is attached to a golden crown which, like the bells, protects the wearer when in the presence of God.

V39 the tunic is made of linen and though my translation says “checkered” it more likely meant “fringed.”

The sash is also linen and embroidered for decoration

And the turban cloth is also of linen. And since no colors are designated, it is probably natural linen colored.



V40-43 While the ephod, breastplate, and turban are one of a kind, the rest of the priestly garb is personalized and presumably meant to be worn regularly to identify them as priests.

Interestingly, all of the priests are also meant wear holy underwear as an added precaution when working in the Tabernacle.

Fun Fact: this passage is the reason why Mormons are expected to wear holy garments whenever they enter a Mormon Temple



Exodus

Chapter 29

Having described the place of worship and the priestly vestments, the book now turns to the rituals by which the priests will be set apart for service to God.

V1-35 Note that all of the ordination must be complete *before* the priests can enter the tabernacle.

The consecration is broken down into several phases;

- Washing – a ritual bath, a mikvah (not unlike baptism)
 - V1-4 Preparation and washing. Presumably Aaron and his sons have already put on the designated undergarments in private. Ancient Israel definitely had a “thing” about nudity.
- Investiture – they are dressed in the holy garments
 - V5-6 Later the sons will each take turns being dressed in the garments
- Anointing – literally, the application of oil to the body, but symbolically it represents a kind of sheath or shield for the body being consecrated
 - V7-9 It sounds as if the oil is being poured over the turban, but probably not
 - You may recall the line from the Psalm 133: It is like the precious oil on the head, running down upon the beard, on the beard of Aaron, running down over the collar of his robes.
- Purification – sacrifices. Blood was seen as the source of life and its consumption is a recognition of God’s power over life and death
 - V 10-28 Each animal is sacrificed a little differently
 - V10-14 The bull is a burnt offering - no eating - but only the entrails are burned on the altar, most of the bull is burned on a larger fire outside (the altar is 7.5’ square grill but even that isn’t big enough for a whole bull
 - V15-18 the first lamb is also a burnt offering, though like the bull, some of its blood is reserved for “decorating” the altar.
 - V18-25 Parts of the second lamb are also offered as a burnt offering, but specifically offerings from Aaron and his sons and not on behalf of the whole people as the first two were.
 - Like the altar, some of the blood is reserved for marking Aaron and his sons.
 - V26-28 Portions of the 2nd lamb are then consumed and these portions are then designated as for the priests use from now on.

- Ordination – All of the preceding is preparation for the act of actually setting someone aside for divine service – it is a kind of sacrament a public and visible sign of God’s work within someone
 - V29-30 Each of Aaron’s sons then take turns in the priestly vestments for their own anointing and they set up a weekly rotation schedule. This idea of weekly service continued well into Jesus’ time. In ancient Israel there were 24 divisions or clans of priests who each took a week of service at the Temple in order.
 - V31-35 The remainder of the meat from the second lamb is boiled and eaten by Aaron and his sons. It appears that it is by eating this specially reserved meat that they are “ordained.”

V36-37 This seems to suggest that the ordination ritual is a week long affair and aside from the sacrifices as part of the ordination process itself, there are two daily offerings for atonement and just in case the altar somehow was desecrated overnight.

V38-46 Now that the Tabernacle is set up and the priests consecrated, a daily expectation of what the priests shall do is set up, conveniently at breakfast and dinner time each day.

Exodus

Chapter 30

Chapter 30 describes several more furnishings for the tabernacle, defines the first Israelite tax, and has some things to say about incense.

V1-10 First up is the altar of incense, which is, basically, a smaller version of the altar set up outside the tent. More like a gold-plated hibachi. However, unlike the larger altar, this one is specifically for the burning of incense and it is specifically forbidden to not burn any other sacrifices on it except on one day a year when a small amount of blood is burnt to reconcile Israel to God. Presumably this is the Day of Atonement (Yom Kippur) which is high holy day though that isn't explicit in the text here.

Given that the Tabernacle is essentially a slaughterhouse with raw blood being flung about it probably stank something fierce, so the incense was surely necessary.

V11-16 To support the work of the Temple and the to provide a livelihood to the priests, a half shekel tax is instituted. Though modern translations aren't clear, the tax is only levied on men (over 20 as it says). Now you may recall that elsewhere in scripture (Samuel and Chronicles) God is very much opposed to counting the number of Israelites, though here seems ok with it, though one way to understand v16 is that paying the tax makes up for holding the census.

Just to step out of the text for a moment, it seems unlikely that the wandering Israelites would bother to set up a mint and coin money. Archeological evidence suggests that shekels weren't introduced in Israel until well after the time of David (around 700BC). So this passage, at least, is probably a later editorial addition that was used to justify a tax imposed by the Israelite kings.

Shekel is actually just the Hebrew word for "weight," but shekel coins were usually made of silver and weighed about half an ounce. Gerahs were to shekels as pennies are dollars, a subdivision of the primary unit of currency.

V17-21 The last furnishing for the Tabernacle is described, the wash basin. Here the priests were meant to wash their hands and feet before approaching the presence of the Lord. This is not dissimilar to Moses needing to remove his shoes, how in our own liturgy there is a tradition of the priest washing their hands, or how Muslims wash their feet and hands before worship.

From a practical perspective, it probably also helped limit the spread of disease after handling raw meat.

V22-33 an aromatic oil is described for anointing the holy furnishings as well as the tabernacle itself in order to mark them as set aside for God. This is similar to the oil of Chrism which we use for anointing at baptisms, which is something that can only be made by a bishop.

A hin is equal to about 5.5 quarts and is the liquid equivalent of an ephah (which is ~ a bushel)

V34-38 The incense for the altar of incense is described and its particular aroma, just like the anointing oil above, is reserved for the holy spaces and for someone to use it for purely personal aesthetic reasons, that would be a desecration.

Exodus

Chapter 31

This is a very short chapter that closes out this prolonged period of law-giving.

V1-11 God has singled out two persons to be the primary craftsman leading the construction of the tabernacle, its appointments and the priestly vestments.

Note that the primary craftsman is of the tribe of Judah, while the secondary craftsman is from the tribe of Dan. This neatly corresponds with the division of Israel into two kingdoms after Solomon, with Judah being the leading tribe of the south, and Dan the most populous of the north. The two kingdoms also had rivalling temple sites (this is part of the conversation between Jesus and the Samaritan woman, as the Samaritans are descendants of the northern tribes (who weren't all "lost")). This would suggest that the southerners were, in fact, right about Jerusalem and their sense of superiority. However, it is possible that this may also reflect the southern bias of the later editors of these texts.

V12-17 For the third time*, God gives the commandment about the sabbath, though this is the first time that the death penalty is attached for those who violate it, and it is also the first time it is explicitly linked to the seven-day creation story in Genesis – which is also a clue that this passage may have been inserted by later editors.

One thing I think we should consider though is the centrality of sabbath in the life of God's people and to what degree we make sabbath a part of our lives – and the likely reality that we don't really.

Ezra Klein podcast on sabbath at <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/01/03/opinion/ezra-klein-podcast-judith-shulevitz.html>

Transcript here https://stlukescamillus.com/wp-content/uploads/2023/05/Sabbath_Ezra-Klein.pdf

*also in chapter 16 around the gathering of Manna, and again in Chapter 20 as part of the ten commandments.

V18 God gives Moses two stone tablets with the covenant. Presumably, this is all the commandments given since chapter 20 and not just what we call the ten commandments.

Exodus

Chapter 32

We now return to the narrative and how the Israelites have managed without Moses.

V1 We are not sure how long Moses was up on the mountain communing with God, but apparently it was a while. The story picks up again at some point after the events of chapter 24 when all the people gathered together and swore eternal devotion to God and promised to follow the ten commandments, including the one about idols.

Nevertheless, after some period they decide that Moses is lost and that it would be nice if they could have a God who is just a tad more approachable.

V2-6 There is an analog to another story from later in Israel's history when king Jeroboam built the northern temple and cast calves to act as footstools for God in much the same manner as the cherubim on the ark (which hasn't been built yet) do.

It is perhaps a little surprising how quickly Aaron accedes to these demands, seeming to undermine the confidence that Moses expressed in him back in ch 24.

Also, the golden earrings (which everyone seems to wear) are elsewhere in scripture (Genesis 35.4) associated with the worship of foreign gods, suggesting that by their wearing them, the Israelites had already displayed a disappointing proclivity towards being unfaithful to their own God.

V7-10 God perceives the unfaithfulness unfolding in the Israelite camp, and somewhat petulantly (for God) tells Moses to leave God alone so that God's anger can "burn hot" and "consume them" which with the promise to make a great nation of Moses, seems to suggest God intends to just wipe them out and start over.

Honestly, at this point in the story, It feels like God really shouldn't be so disappointed with the fecklessness of humanity. Though God's words may be interpreted as a kind of test of Moses' character. How might Moses respond to such an offer and to God's justifiable anger at Israel.

V12-14 Whether God is truly angry or if God's words are merely a test, Moses acquits himself well and pleads for mercy and grace upon Israel's behalf and God chooses not to punish the people.

V15-20 Moses, however, as he approaches the camp and hears and then sees the people reveling in front of the idols, himself loses his temper and throws down the tablets, apparently in disgust, and breaks them.

I'm not sure how one burns gold and grounds it to powder, but nevertheless, Moses punishment of making the people drink their sin is a pretty powerful image.

V21-24 Moses, understandably, turns to Aaron and basically asks 'why did you let this happen?!' Aaron pretty much lies about it to absolve himself of any complicity and suggests that calf made itself.

V25-29 Moses then asks who might be on God's side and the men of Levi gather to him and Moses has them take up sword and begin killing those who had rapturously participated in the worship of the idols which they do.

Though Moses says they have brought a blessing on themselves and from that point on separates the Levites for service to God, I would note that it isn't God who explicitly tells Moses to do this.

V30-35 Moses chastise the people and then returns to the mountain to commune with God to ask for forgiveness. God seems to not hold Moses accountable but promises that those responsible will be punished – though Aaron, the one most guilty, seems to escape – which they are by a plague.

Note: So if we remember that back in chapter 29, as God was laying out the requirements for the Tabernacle, God spoke of what lay behind God's actions with Israel when God said; "And they shall know that I am the LORD their God, who brought them out of the land of Egypt that I might dwell among them; I am the LORD their God." God's desire is to dwell with us, which is why God seems so angry and disappointed at the golden calf (and sin generally) because it thwarts God's keen desire to be among us.

Exodus Chapter 33

Chapter 33 begins the ending of Exodus, though the impact of the golden calf incident still hangs over the Israelites.

V1-3 God tells Moses it is time to be on their way again and to move out of Sinai and towards the promised land. God again promises to remove the current inhabitants but also says that God won't be going with them but will send an angel instead in order that God's anger will not be provoked against them.

As I've said before the importance of "milk and honey" is that they represent the abundance of creation – they are not the produce of human labor, but of nature.

V4-6 In an act of contrition, the people enter into a period akin to mourning and abandon the wearing of colorful and decorative items of clothing.

V7-11 So, despite saying that God could no longer deign to be among the people, God does still visit with Moses and Joshua apparently.

This tent is not the tabernacle – that still remains to be built because the sin of the people has not been addressed sufficiently to begin work on it.

V12-16 Moses makes an argument with God about the importance of God's continuing leadership in the movement of the Israelites towards their destination.

Moses asks for 2 things:

- To know whom is to accompany him to the promised land – though it's unclear whether he is asking about which people or whom the leader should be.
- To better understand what God wants

I don't imagine these are same things many people seek, to know who can be trusted and who is a friend and to know how to live their best life.

Moses then offers a rationale for God's continuing presence to the *people* and not just Moses.

Basically if God trusts Moses and wants Moses to be effective in leading the people, then God must make it clear, beyond a doubt, that God trusts Moses ergo, God should continue to be present to God's people that they might learn greater trust.

Further, this relationship will set apart the Israelites and make them an example for the whole world to glorify God.

V17-23 God is persuaded by Moses and promises and then, seemingly in response to Moses' request in v13, God promises to show Moses all of the "goodness of God" but allowing Moses to see God pass by from a safe place, and without being able to see the "face" of God.

I can't help but be reminded of Thomas's words of doubt in comparison to Moses longing to know God better and to be able to "see" him.

Exodus Chapter 34

This chapter continues to tell of impact of the golden calf “incident,” with much of it taken up with a summary of the laws previously given.

V1-4 Since Moses broke the original tablets, God tells him to make a new tablets and God will write the laws on them again (though later the text says that Moses wrote them in dictation)

Lots of traditions suggest these and the original tablets were made of sapphire, however, the Hebrew word, *sapir*, originally referred to lapis lazuli, a blue stone that is found in Sinai and Egypt and in pieces large enough to maybe be used for engraving text on. Also, the earliest known discovery of sapphires comes from much later, around 480BC in Sri Lanka.

V5-9 God descends to meet Moses on the mountain, as promised in the last chapter and passes by that Moses might perceive God’s “glory.”

Of course, this begs the question of how Moses and God have interacted previously; who or what has Moses been talking to during all that time up on the mountain?

Nevertheless, God comes and proclaims God’s name, יהוה which is translated here as “the Lord” as is usual in Jewish tradition (Adonai).

The poem in verses 6 and 7 may come from a creed-like statement used in ancient Israelite worship as versions and excerpts of it appear throughout the Hebrew scriptures (Number 14.18, Neh 9.17, Psalms 86, 103, & 145, Jer 32.18, Joel 2.3, Jonah 4.2, & Nah 1.3).

As Christians, I imagine most of us would agree with first part but would balk at the idea of punishing the children, grandchildren, and great-children of people who get crosswise with God; especially as doing so would seem to negate the claims of the first half of a forgiving God. I would suggest that Jesus of the Gospels leans heavily upon the first half and more or less denies the second.

After seeing God’s glory, Moses worships God, acknowledging God’s divinity and power, and asking again for both forgiveness of the people and the continued presence of God among them.

V10-16 God makes some big promises (again), beginning with the promise of the land to which he is (slowly) leading them. God also warns them about making peace with the inhabitants because to do so will lead them away from God.

In all of these covenants, the promise remains primarily the same, existence as a united people, independent of others, and controlling a particular bit of geography. This fits in nicely with the perspective of the priests and kings who, throughout the Hebrew scripture, advocate for religious and ethnic purity as well as political independence.

This perspective is not the unanimous one though. In other books, such as Jonah, Esther, and Ruth, there are positive depictions of foreigners, including foreign women and the positive contributions of those non-Israelites. The prophets also point towards a kind of universal character of God's message, and a skepticism towards the centrality of the sacrificial system centered on the Jerusalem Temple. Jesus' teachings and actions tend to lean more heavily on this perspective than on the insular view of the priestly caste. In fact, the story of the Syro-Phoenician woman whose daughter is ill speaks directly to this.

V17-26 A series of commandments is given here pertaining primarily to religious obligations with one particular dietary restriction. All of these have been commanded by God before, reinforcing that this is reiteration of God's laws in the wake of Israel's grievous offense.

V27-28 In contradiction to verse 1, here we are told that Moses himself carved the new tablets. And if it took 40 days, it was surely more expansive than what was recounted in this chapter. Of course, 40 is the go-to number to describe "a long time," and we are meant to understand that God provided all that Moses needed in that time.

V29-35 Moses returns to the people to deliver the Law, but he is transformed (transfigured even) and in the original Hebrew, what we read as "shone" implies something more like glows as it is a verbal form of the noun "ray" as in ray of light.

And just as God covers the glory of God in the clouds around the mountain, the glory of God emanating from Moses is "clouded" by the veil he wears except when he goes into the Tabernacle to commune with God.

Exodus

Chapter 35

This chapter begins the closing episode of Exodus, namely the construction of the Tabernacle. For the most part, this and the following chapters merely repeat the instructions given for building the tabernacle in chapters 24-31 except now it is being completed.

V1-3 We get the command for keeping sabbath for the fourth time, again with the death penalty and this time with the additional instruction to not start any fires. There's been a fascinating argument over the centuries within Rabbinic Judaism about whether one can keep a fire burning that was kindled (i.e., lit) before sabbath begins.

V4-19 A combination of the death of the revelers, the creation of the new tablets, and Moses' own intercession have restored the relationship between God and the Israelites, so Moses now begins to tell the Israelites about God's commands for the Tabernacle and the expectation that the people will provide all that is required in both materials and labor – the Tabernacle itself is a kind of offering.

V20-29 The generosity of the offering here is a counter to the willingness of some previously to give their golden earrings for the making of the calf idol, though prominently throughout the text it is implied that there were those who were unwilling to give to the project of building the Tabernacle.

V30-35 As the people are gathering the supplies, Moses tells of the appointment by God of Bezalel and Oholiab as the master craftsmen of the project.

Exodus

Chapter 36

The chapter picks right up from Chapter 35 and begins the telling of the construction of the Tabernacle and appointments

V1-7 We are told of the overwhelming generosity of those who were willing and how it became too much for the craftsman to keep up with, to the point that Moses had to ask them to stop giving.

This fits well with the kind of abundance mindset that God asks of us, to recognize that we have more than enough to complete what God asks of us. This generosity of labor is also meant to stand in contrast to the Israelites in Egypt, where Pharaoh complained of their inability to ever produce enough for his wants

V8-35 These verses (as well as most of the remaining chapters tell of how the Tabernacle was built exactly as God commanded, showing that at least some of the Israelites are faithful and eager to follow the Lord.

At this point, they are only creating the items which will become the Tabernacle, though the actual structure isn't actually put together until after all of the parts are made.

Exodus Chapters 37-39

These chapters, more or less, parrot back the instructions given in chapters 25-28. The chapters generally speak of Oholiab as crafting each item, though it is clearly the work of a number of people with Oholiab as the master craftsman guiding the work. The construction follows the instructions from God exactly. The order of construction differs somewhat from the order of the instructions, with the more holy elements (lampstand, ark, etc) being made after the parts of the Tabernacle are constructed.

37:7-9 gives details that the instructions did not, that the cherubim statues atop the covenant lid faced each other.

The courtyard walls and outside items (i.e., the altar/grill) are made after all of the Tabernacle items are made, and the vestments are made last of all. There is no timeframe given for how long such a project might have taken, but presumably it would have taken, at least, several months.

38:8 provides an interesting detail, that the bronze basin was made from melted down mirrors! Ancient mirrors were made from polished stone (like obsidian) or polished metal, with bronze being the most common. If there was a part of the story which spoke of why the mirrors needed to be surrendered it has been lost, but if the idea was that mirrors were associated with ornamentation, it would make sense that they would be gotten rid of as part of the repentance after the golden idol episode. Otherwise, there are no laws or commandments related to mirrors in the scriptures.

38:21 Tells us that the Levites, who had rallied to Moses after he discovered the golden idol, provided the brawn for the construction of the Tabernacle.

38:24-31

An accounting of the metal used:

Gold: 29 Talents, 730 shekels = 2642 lbs

Silver: 100 talents, 1775 shekels (gathered by the head tax mentioned back in chapter 30)
= 9092 lbs

Bronze: 70 talents, 2400 shekels = 6394 lbs

That's a lot of metal!!

39:32-43 After everything is completed, it is all brought to Moses for his inspection and approval that all is as God had commanded. After ensuring that it was, Moses blessed the Israelites.

The Hebrew word translated as *work* here, is not the same one used for usual labor, as in farmwork for example, but rather one used for completing religious obligations.

Exodus

Chapter 40

The book ends with Moses completing the construction of the tabernacle and with the presence of God still manifest among the Israelites.

V1-15 God commands Moses to now set up the tabernacle, consecrate it, and ordain the priests to serve it on the first day of the new year.

V16-33 The text tells us that the Tabernacle is set up at the beginning of the second year since leaving Egypt, so 1 down, 39 to go. Moses sets up the Tabernacle just as God commanded, again showing that at this point at least, Moses and the Israelites are on the same page and willingly following God's commands exactly. This is surely the acme of Israel's faithfulness.

V34-38 God's presence is made manifest with a cloud by day and fire by night, that Israel might know and believe that God is with them. When God is present, even Moses does not enter into the Tabernacle itself.

God continues to lead the people and when God's presence departs from the Tabernacle, they know it is time to pack up and travel on.

The Exodus, the departure from Egypt is complete and now Israel enters into a new phase, wandering, until the people are ready to enter into the promised land. Israel has gone from a people oppressed in Egypt to a free people whose way of life is fully endorsed by God, all under the leadership of Moses.

We have seen the primary theme of the Hebrew scriptures played out here; their on-again, off-again faithfulness to God and the suffering that comes their way when they depart from God. We have also seen, in Moses, the model for the prophets to come,

whose authority derives not from their worldly status, but from their ability to communicate God's desires for God's people.