

EXODUS FROM EGYPT

Journey to the Holy Mountain

Exodus 15-19

INTRODUCTION

In Exodus 1-14, God saw the affliction of His people, and heard the Israelites cry out to Him. He will deliver them. At Horeb, the holy mountain of God, the Lord appears to Moses in a vision of a burning bush that is not consumed. God calls him to lead His people out of their servitude in Egypt, and to bring them to that same mountain, where they will serve and worship God. At first, Moses objects. But God promises to be with him. He assigns his brother, Aaron, to assist him.

Upon their return to Egypt, Moses and Aaron tell the elders of Israel all that God has spoken. The Israelites believe and worship the Lord. Things start off well.

Pharaoh, however, is a different matter. When Moses and Aaron speak to him, he refuses to believe. In response to God's word, Pharaoh asserts his divinity as a living god, by making life harder for the Israelites. The battle is between God, and Pharaoh, who sees himself as a god. *Whom will the people serve?*

What follows is a series of nine plagues. Each plague serves as a call to repentance; and each plague shows God's power and superiority over the gods of Egypt. Moses warns Pharaoh about the tenth plague. If he does not let God's first-born leave (Israel), then Egypt will lose all their first-born.

In preparation for the final plague, God institutes the observance of Passover (Hebrew, *pesah*), which means "to pass over." On the night of the final plague, the destroying angel will "pass over" the homes marked with the blood of sacrificed lambs (Ex 12:27). The people of Israel are commanded by God to do the following.

- 1) On the 10th day of Nissan, select a male unblemished lamb, one year old.
- 2) From the 10th -14th day, observe the lamb and ensure that it is unblemished.
- 3) Sacrifice the lamb on the 14th day of Nissan. Not a bone is to be broken.
- 4) Dip a branch of hyssop in the blood of the lamb.
- 5) Sprinkle the blood of the lamb on the doorposts and lintel of the home.
- 6) Eat the flesh of the lamb roasted, with unleavened bread and bitter herbs.
- 7) Annually celebrate the Passover as a seven-day feast, in "remembrance" of the original Passover. It will become present to all future generations.

At midnight, on the 15th of Nissan, the lives of all the first-born in Egypt are taken; and by morning, the Israelites are free to depart. They leave in great numbers, along with others who join them, with all their flocks and herds. As they journey, the Lord God leads and protects them, appearing as a pillar of cloud by day and a pillar of fire by night.

When Pharaoh and his army go forth in pursuit and overcome them, God miraculously parts the waters of the sea, allowing Israel to cross over safely. He then closes the sea on the Egyptian chariots and soldiers as they pursue Israel. After the crossing, Israel is no longer in Egyptian territory. Pharaoh and Egypt no longer poses a physical threat.

However, a spiritual threat remains. The people of Israel have left Egypt, but Egypt is still very much a part of them. Will they continue the journey, or will they return to Egypt? *Whom will they serve and how will they serve?*

STUDY AND REFLECTION

The Hymn of Victory (Exodus 15:1-21)

After the miraculous crossing of the sea, Moses teaches the Israelites a hymn, while Miriam teaches the women to respond to each verse with the refrain: “Let us sing to the Lord, for He is greatly glorified. Horse and rider, He cast into the sea” (Ex 15:20-21).

In the first part of the hymn, God is praised and exalted as Israel’s strength and salvation. He is the Divine Warrior, and by His right hand, the enemies of Israel are shattered. He is the God who has power over the winds, the waters, and the sea.

In the second part of the hymn, God is acknowledged as the One Who redeemed Israel by His steadfast love; and is now leading Israel to His holy dwelling place (15:13). He will plant them on His own mountain, the place for his abode, His sanctuary, which He has established (Ex 15:17). This is will be fulfilled at Mount Sinai, the future Jerusalem on Mount Zion, and the New Jerusalem that is to come. And the Lord will reign forever.

The people of Philistia, Edom, Moab and Canaan, will hear what the God of Israel has done, and they will tremble. “Still as stone,” will they watch as Israel passes by.

The First Test: Water at Marah (Exodus 15:22-27; Numbers 33:8-15)

Moses leads Israel onward from the Red Sea into the *Wilderness of Shur*, which is also referred to as the *Wilderness of Etham* (Num 33:8). There is no water. Will the people have faith that God will provide?

After three days, the people of Israel arrive at *Marah*, which means “bitterness.” There is water at this place, but the water is extremely bitter and undrinkable. The people murmured or grumbled against Moses. This is the *first test of faith* after the crossing of the sea. The Lord shows Moses a tree or piece of wood. He throws it into the water, and the water become sweet and drinkable. Whatever the natural properties of tree may have been, it would have not been enough to “heal” the waters. God works a temporary miracle, so that the Israelites may believe and open their hearts to God.

Note that there is a connection here to the first plague that took place in Egypt. Pharaoh hardened his heart and would not respond with faith, so the first plague ensued. Moses touched the waters of the Nile with his rod. The waters turned into blood and became foul and undrinkable.

However, if Israel opens its heart to God and responds with the obedience of faith, God will protect them from the plagues and diseases of Egypt. He will become Israel’s “Healer.” The Lord God gives them this promise: “If you will diligently hearken to the voice of the Lord your God, and do that which is right in his eyes, and give heed to His commandments and keep all His statutes, I will put none of the diseases upon you which I put upon the Egyptians; for I am the Lord, your healer” (Ex 15:26).

According to several Fathers of the Church, the tree prefigures the cross of Christ by which we are all healed (St. Justin, Origen, St Cyril of Alexandria). In the Mystery of Baptism, the water becomes the cross and the cross becomes the water (St. Ambrose). Those who are immersed into the baptismal waters are immersed into the Cross – the death, the burial, and the Resurrection of Jesus Christ.

From Marah, the Israelites continue their journey until they reach *Elim*. At this oasis they find twelve springs of water and seventy palm trees. They encamp there for some time, before continuing their journey.

Again, we are provided with numbers They have something to say. What is the meaning of the numbers *twelve* and *seventy*?

First, God has provided twelve springs for the twelve tribes of Israel. There is enough water for each tribe. The number seventy, a number that represents completeness and order, points to the future leadership of Israel. Upon the advice of Jethro, Moses will appoint seventy elders to assist him in governing the people.

The twelve springs foreshadow and prefigure the twelve Apostles of Christ. They will become twelve fountains of spiritual water, which will quench the spiritual thirst of those who seek the one true God. Also, Christ will send forth the Seventy, a second group of apostles, who will provide heavenly and spiritual shade for those on earth (Origen, St. Gregory of Nyssa).

The Second Test: Quails and Manna (Exodus 16:4-36)

The people of Israel set out from *Elim* and encamped by the Red Sea (Num 33:11). Then they continued through the *wilderness of Sin*, which is between Elim and Sinai. They came to this wilderness on the fifteenth day of the second month, which is approximately third days after their departure from Egypt. By this time, their food supplies are running out.

In the *Wilderness of Sin*, the Scriptures tell us that “the whole congregation of the people murmured against Moses and Aaron” (Ex 16:2-3). But their complaints are addressed against God. The Lord then promises to rain bread out of heaven and to feed them with meat. The test is this: Will the people walk in God’s law or not? Will they listen to His instructions?

The instructions are simple. The bread will fall from heaven and they will be able to gather it in the morning. They are to gather only what they need: a day’s portion every day. It needs to be eaten that day and not left over for the next. Anything left over will become wormy and rotten. On Fridays, they may gather a double portion, and on the Sabbath, they are not to gather at all.

And so, it happened. In the evening quails come up and covered the camp. And in the morning, when the dew lifted, it left behind a flake like thing, fine as hoarfrost on the ground. When the people of Israel saw it, they said to one another, “What is it?” (*man-hu*) (Ex 16:15). This is the famous *manna (man-hu)*, the bread that God promised to provide in the wilderness.

God works in two ways. He can arrange all things by Divine Providence, working with nature and the laws of nature. He can also perform miracles, which defy the laws of nature, and cannot be explained.

The manna that God provides in the wilderness seems to be a miraculous event, a supernatural phenomenon. Efforts have been made to identify the manna with the sap of a certain desert shrub, or the emission of an insect living in the desert. However, could such plant life or insects produce enough sap or emission to feed a large population of people daily? Not likely. Furthermore, the Scriptures clearly state that a significant greater amount fell on Fridays, and none appears on the Sabbath (Ex 16:27). This would mean that plant life and insects in that region were able to keep the Sabbath! Finally, this miracle continued for forty years, while Israel wanders in the wilderness (Ex 16:35). The manna is clearly one of the great “wonders” or miracles of God. The “bread from heaven” becomes a most fitting type of the true bread from heaven, the Most Holy Eucharist.

The quails, however, do reflect God’s Divine Providence in His care for Israel in the wilderness. According to the Jewish historian, Josephus, great flocks of quails are found about the gulf of Arabia.¹ In the month of May or June, they return to Europe and Asia from the warmer regions of Africa. At this time, God may have directed the course of a vast number of quails to the camp of Israel.

It is here, in the Wilderness of Sin, in association with manna, the bread from heaven, that God establishes the Sabbath as a day of rest. The manna would normally spoil by the following day. But is miraculously preserved from the sixth day until the end of the seventh day. In Egypt, the Israelites would have followed a ten-day week, according to Egyptian custom. Now, they will follow and seven-day week, and the seventh day will be day of rest. For a previously enslaved population that worked every day, the Sabbath comes as a joyous gift.

The Israelites are now free children of God who do the work they were created to do, and then rest and worship God as they were created to do. The Sabbath must be taken seriously. It gives Israel an opportunity for worship denied in Egypt and helps them remember that they are free.

New Testament Connections

There are several New Testament connections here.

The first connection is with the *Lord’s Prayer*, the prayer that Jesus teaches his disciples (Mt 6:9-13; Lk 11:1-4), and more specifically, with the petition “Give us this daily our daily bread.” “Daily bread” can be understood to represent what is essential to us each day. In the wilderness, the Israelites were instructed to gather manna that was essential as their food for the day. In a similar way, Jesus instructs his disciples to pray for what is essential for the day, every day. In other words, we need to ask the Lord to provide for us every day. Note that word “daily” is a translation of the Greek work *epiousious*, which literally means “above the essential” or “supersubstantial.” We are asking God to provide us with the bread that comes down from heaven, the Most Holy Eucharist.

¹ Josephus, Ant. 3.1.

The second connection is with the miraculous multiplication of bread and fish. According to the Gospels, Jesus performs this miracle twice. At the first event, which is recorded in all the Gospels (Mt 14:13-21; Mk 6:30-44; Lk 9:10-17; Jn 6:1-14), Jesus takes five loaves of bread and two fish, blesses them, and feeds five thousand men, not counting women and children. Twelve full baskets of fragments are collected. Jesus is the New Moses, who has the power and authority to feed all twelve tribes of Israel. At the second event (Mt 15:32-39, Mk 8:1-9), Jesus takes seven loaves of bread and a few fish, blesses them, and feed four thousand men, not counting women and children. Seven full baskets of fragments are collected. The number *seven* represents fullness, completion, perfection. Jesus is the New Moses who has the power and authority to feed all the nations of the earth.

The third connection is with the Most Holy Eucharist. The manna prefigures the Eucharist. Speaking about the miracle of manna in the Old Testament, Jesus says the following: “Your fathers ate the manna in the wilderness, and they died. This is the bread that comes down from heaven, that a man may eat of it and not die. I am the living bread which came down from heaven; if any one eats of this bread, he will live forever; and the bread which I shall give for the life of the world is my flesh” (Jn 6:49-51). “Truly, truly, I say to you, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of man and drink his blood, you have no life in you; he who eats my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life, and I will raise him up on the last day” (Jn 6:53-54).

The Third Test: Water at Rephidim (Exodus 17)

From the Wilderness of Sin, the people of Israel moved on “by stages,” and encamped at Rephidim (Ex 17:1), also called the Wilderness of Sinai (Num 33:15).

What does this mean, Israel moved on “by stages”? First, it implies that terrain was rough, and that the passages were narrow. It was difficult for the large population of Israel to reach Rephidim. So, they either moved slowly, short distances at a time; or they made their way in smaller groups, one group at a time.

At Rephidim, there was no water to drink. Again, the people murmured against Moses, and this time, they were ready to stone him (Ex 17:3-4). They had forgotten all the great wonders that God had done for them through Moses. Now, they longer trust Moses nor their God. They had lost their faith.

Then God directed Moses to take his rod with which he struck the Nile, and to stand before the rock at Horeb with some of the elders of Israel, and to strike the rock with the rod. Moses did as the Lord commanded. In the presence of the elders, he hit the rock with his rod, and an abundance of water gushed forth from it. Moses called the place *Massah*, which means “test” or “temptation,” and *Meribah*, which means “quarrel” or “strife.”

New Testament Connection

The rock at Horeb is a foreshadowing, a prefigure of Christ. Jesus will become the Rock, out of which living waters will flow, the gift of the Holy Spirit.

While speaking to the Samaritan woman at the well, Jesus says to her: “Whoever drinks of the water that I shall give him will never thirst; the water that I shall give him will become in him a spring of water welling up to eternal life” (Jn 4:14). Jesus is the New Moses, who will provide the water of eternal life to the people of God. The water that Jesus is speaking about is the gift of the Holy Spirit.

In Jerusalem, on the last day of the feast of the Tabernacles, Jesus stood up and cried out: “If anyone is thirsty, let him come to me and drink. He who believes in me, as the scripture has said, ‘Out of his heart shall flow rivers of living water.’” (Jn 7:37-38). Jesus was speaking about the Holy Spirit, which those who believed in him were to receive.

Crucified upon the cross, Jesus is both the New Moses and the Rock. He is struck with the lance, and blood and water flow from His pierced side (John 19:35) as a sign of the outpouring of the Holy Spirit. Those who drink shall never die. We receive the Holy Spirit by faith: in the Mystery of Baptism (water) and the Mystery of the Eucharist (blood).

The battle with Amalek (Exodus 17:8-16)

The Amalekites were descendants of Amalek, the grandson of Esau (Gen 36:15-16). Therefore, they were Edomites, a tribe that lived in Edom and the region of Kadesh (Gen 14:7; Num 13:29; 14:25). They were a wandering tribe, who lived on the fringe of settled territories, and were possibly traders or raiders of villages and rural communities (1 Sam 30:1-20; Judges 6:1-6). The Amalekites controlled the caravan routes between Arabia and Egypt.

For whatever reason, the Amalekites attacked the people of Israel at Rephidim. This may have taken the form of quick raids from the rear, with the goal of plundering, stealing cattle, food, and possessions, or to take people that could be sold as slaves.

In the Book of Deuteronomy, Moses says the following about the attacks: “Remember what Amalek did to you on the way as you came out of Egypt, how he attacked you on the way, when you were faint and weary, and cut off at your rear all who lagged behind you; and he did not fear God” (Deut 25:17-18).

In response to the attacks, Moses called Joshua, a young warrior and head of the army, and said to him: “Chose for us men, and go out, fight with Amalek; tomorrow I will stand on top of the hill with the rod of God in my hand” (Ex 17:9).

The battle with the Amalekites would have taken place in a valley (the wilderness of Sinai). So, Joshua did as Moses told him, and fought with the Amalekites. In the meantime, Moses, Aaron and Hur went up to the top of a hill. Whenever Moses held up his hands, Israel prevailed in battle; and whenever he lowered his hands, Amalek prevailed. When Moses grew tired, he sat on a stone, and Aaron and Hur held up his hands, one on one side, the other on the other side.

They kept his hands steady until sundown. Joshua won the battle and the Amalekites were defeated. In thanksgiving, Moses built an altar to offer sacrifices. He named the altar “The Lord is my banner” (Ex 17:16).

This event attests to the great strength of Moses, both physical and spiritual.

New Testament Connection

There are two important New Testament connections.

First, the Fathers of the Church see Moses in this event as a prefigure of Christ, who on the cross, symbolized by the rod, will triumph in victory over the enemy: the devil, sin, and death (Tertullian, St. Cyprian, St. John Chrysostom, St. Gregory the Theologian).

Second, the event prefigures the power of intercessory prayer. Even though Moses was silent, holding up his hands with the rod, in his heart, he was crying out to God in prayer (St. Ambrose, St. Gregory the Theologian). The Israelite army represent the Militant Church on earth, which continuously engaged in a spiritual battle for the salvation of souls. The Amalekites represent Satan and his army of evil spirits. Triumph in this spiritual warfare comes through prayer, fasting, and the victory of the Cross.

Jethro's visit and the appointment of judges (Exodus 18)

Jethro, the priest of Midian and Moses' father-in-law, heard about all that God had done for Moses and the people of Israel. He came to Moses, together with Moses' wife, Zipporah, and their sons, Gershom, and Eliezer. (At some point in time, Moses send his immediate family from Egypt back to Jethro in Midian). In thanksgiving for all that God had done, Jethro offered a burnt offering and sacrifices to God. Aaron and the elders of Israel came to the banquet and ate with Moses and Jethro, his father-in-law.

The following day, Moses sat to judge people's disputes and cases, from morning to evening. When Jethro saw this, he said: "What is this that you are doing for the people? Why do you sit alone?" (Ex 18:14). You wear yourself out and the people. This is too have for you; you are not able to perform it alone.

Jethro gave Moses the following advice. He said: "Choose able men from all the people, such as fear God, men who are trustworthy and who hate a bribe; and place them over the people as rulers of thousands, of hundreds, of fifties, and of tens. And let them judge the people at all times; every great matter they shall bring to you... so it will be easier for you, and they will bear the burden for you" (Ex 18:21-22).

So, Moses listened to the advice of his father-in-law. He chose men to serve as leaders of the people: rulers of thousands, of hundreds, of fifties, and of tens. They judged the people in small matters, and only the hard cases were brought to Moses.

The Israelites arrive at Mount Sinai (Exodus 19:1-2)

Moses led the people of Israel from Rephidim, and they came into the wilderness of Sinai. They encamped there, before the holy mountain, the place where God had appeared to Moses in the vision of the Burning Bush and revealed His Name. In Exodus 3, God promised Moses that after he delivers the people out of Egypt, he will bring them back to that very same place (Mount Horeb) to worship God (Ex 3:12). This is where God wishes to establish a New Covenant with His people.

The Scriptural text tells us that the people arrived at the holy mountain "on the third new moon" (Ex 19:1) after they had left Egypt. "On that day they came into the wilderness

of Sinai” (Ex 19:1). Depending how you interpret the three new moons, the journey took 47 days or 77 days (1.2 or 2.5 months).

At Mount Horeb (Mount Sinai), God will give the people a similar experience to what Moses encountered there in his vision. In Exodus 3, God spoke to one man, Moses. In Exodus 19-20, God will speak to all the people. In Exodus 3, God appeared in the form of fire that descended upon a bush; in Exodus 19-20, God will appear in the form of fire that descends upon an entire mountain. In Exodus 3, the ground was declared to be holy. In Exodus 19-20, the ground will also be declared holy due to the Presence of God.

Just as God commissioned Moses, so now He will commission the people of Israel. He will declare them to be a “kingdom of priests and a holy nation” (Ex 19:6). The mountain will become a Temple, the people will consecrate themselves like priests (Ex 19:10-15), and then they will meet with God Himself (Ex 19:17).

The location of the holy mountain

Despite the information provide in the Books of Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy, there is no absolute certainty about the route the Israelites took from Egypt to the mountain of the Covenant. There are also several different views about the actual location of the mountain. The following are four proposals.

Jabal Musa, the traditional site in the Sinai Peninsula

From the Byzantine period onwards, Christian tradition identified Sinai with the range of mountains in the southern tip of the Sinai Peninsula. These mountains go as high as 2,500 metres (8200 feet) above sea level. The main mountains are Jabal Serbal, Jabal Katerina, and Jabal Musa. Tradition considers Jabal Musa to be Mount Sinai or Horeb. At the foot of this mountain lies the monastery of St. Catharine.

If this is true site of the holy mountain, then the crossing of the sea would have taken place closer to Egypt, across a large lake, or across the northern part of the Gulf of Suez.

Jabal Al-Lawz, in the northwestern part of Arabia

When Moses fled from Pharaoh in Egypt, he “stayed in the land of Midian” (Ex 2:15). Midian is in the northwestern part of Arabia, and not in the Sinai Peninsula. Then, when Moses was keeping the flock of his father-in-law, Jethro, he led the flock to Horeb, the mountain of God, where he experienced the vision of the Burning Bush (Ex 3:1-3). So, the holy mountain should be in Midian or close to Midian.

It has been proposed recently that *Jabal Al-Lawz* in Arabia is Mount Sinai (Mount Horeb). *Jabal al-Lawz*, also known as *Gebel el-Lawz*, is a mountain located in northwest Saudi Arabia, near the Jordanian border, above the Gulf of Aqaba at 2,580 metres above sea level. It is the highest mountain in the Tabuk province. There are several archeological sites in close vicinity to the mountain.

If this is true site of the holy mountain, then crossing of the sea would have taken place at the Gulf of Aqaba. There are two proposed sites for the crossing. The first is from the southern tip of the Sinai Peninsula, across the Straits of Tiran, which connect the Gulf of

Aquba to the Red Sea. The second proposed site is from Nuweiba Beach, on the eastern shore of the Sinai Peninsula, across the Gulf of Aquba.

Gebel Et-Tarif, in the northeastern

Gebel Khashm el Tarif or *Jebel Hashem al-Taref* is a mountain located in the north eastern part of the Sinai Peninsula, at the edge of the *Wilderness of Paran*, close to the northern tip of the Gulf Aquba. It is 30 km west of Eilat, just south of the ancient pilgrim road of *Darb alHajj* (now an asphalt road). This road was an ancient from Egypt to Arabia.

According to this theory, the crossing of the sea took place closer to Egypt, across a large lake, or across the northern part of the Gulf of Suez.

Jabal Sin Bishar, on the Western Sinai Peninsula

The Israeli geographer Menashe Har-el of Tel Aviv University proposed this site as the Biblical Mount Sinai in his 1983 book, *The Sinai Journeys: The Route of the Exodus*. Jab Sin Bishar is the highest mountain in the western Sinai.

According to this theory, the crossing of the sea took place closer to Egypt, across a large lake, or across the northern part of the Gulf of Suez.

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