



ScripturefromScratch

A popular guide to understanding the Bible

Exodus and Exile: Shaping God's People

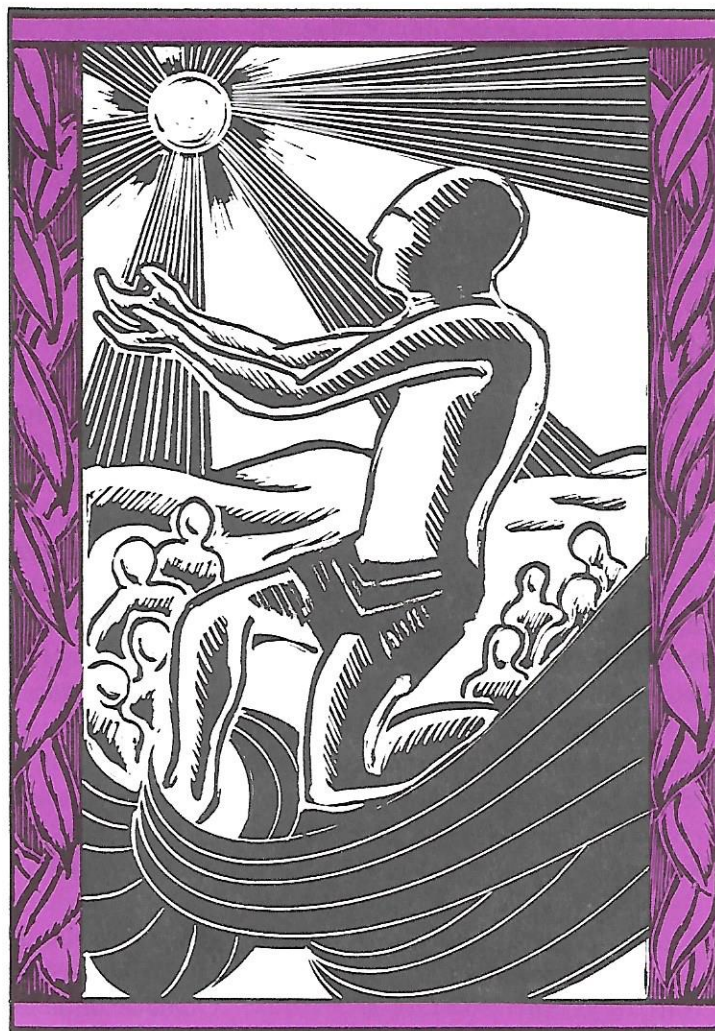
by Virginia Smith

“It was easier then.” Reading the story of God’s people unfolding in the biblical books, I sometimes find myself muttering that. It seems infinitely easier to distinguish God’s hand in a world two or three thousand years gone than in a world that crashes in on me with a bewildering array of problems and possibilities. It must have been easier to be God’s people when a prophet firmly planted his sandals and declaimed, “Thus says the Lord...” or when Jesus announced, “Blessed are you....”

The fact is, it wasn’t easier. It may even have been harder. Comparing then and now and all the sometimes in between, the realization dawns that being God’s chosen may be an immense privilege, but it’s also an incredible challenge, and it’s definitely not for sissies. Replacing the halo with the backbone as a symbol of sanctity might come a lot closer to reality.

Halos and backbones present a study in contrasts, and contrasts seem to comprise an inordinate amount of life. Birth and death, youth and age, wealth and poverty, success and failure. We cling precariously to the pendulum of life, unwitting and often unwilling passengers, as it swings from one extreme to the other. Being baptized doesn’t exempt us. Living godly lives doesn’t exempt us. Nothing exempts us because that’s life. And nobody knew it better than God’s own people, the Israelites.

In this article, we’re going to deal with two such experiences of this special group: One might be viewed as the pinnacle of their long history; one could be regarded as the absolute pit. Reflecting on these incidents from the distant past may help us fathom the murky present more clearly and may even suggest some plausible expectations for the future.



Illustrations by Paula Wiggins

Exodus: A Radical Departure

The Exodus is the kind of larger-than-life historical milestone that often contributes to a people’s understanding of its unique identity. Preserved over generations by storytellers who wove the strands of the story into sagas, watershed events of this nature frequently found their way into epic poetry. The Exodus retained its narrative form when first preserved in writing, probably during Solomon’s reign (961-922 B.C.E.) and now makes up the larger portion of the Torah or Pentateuch (Genesis through Deuteronomy).

Most of the story appears, appropriately, in the Book of Exodus. If staged, this would be Act II of an imposing drama. When Genesis concludes (Act I), the Israelites, little more than an extended family named for its patriarch Israel (originally Jacob), are safely situated in an Egyptian haven where the future stretches pleasurably before them. As the curtain rises on Act II, things have changed dramatically.

Exodus is the Greek term for departure, and never was a designation more fitting. The opening of Exodus is a radical “departure” from the previous situation. Some four centuries have elapsed, and Israel’s descendants have been reduced to slavery (Exodus 1:8-14). Worse, the reigning pharaoh (perhaps Ramses II) has instigated a policy of infanticide designed to reduce the Hebrew population sharply (1:15-22). The future now stretches ominously before God’s people.

Logically, that should be the end of the story. This insignificant band of Semites, possessing neither power nor influence, should have gone the way of many other such groups who exited history’s stage almost as fast as they arrived. That the Israelites did not—and why they did not—is what has kept the Exodus experience in the forefront of Judeo-Christian history for more than three thousand years.

Headline News—The Exodus

Because the outline of the story is familiar, we’ll confine ourselves to those defining moments that make the Exodus memorable. If you find mental imagery helpful, feed a tape of Cecil B. deMille’s *The Ten Commandments* into your mind’s VCR. Even allowing for considerable historical and literary license, this classic film brings to life the hubbub and confusion, the heroes and villains, the dust and sweat, the unrelenting humanness of the people and the unbelievable scope of the logistics.



Praying With Scripture

■ **Life often reflects qualities of exodus and exile. Both can be times of great spiritual growth, but they challenge us to exhibit deep trust. The crises that arose during the Exodus and Exile showed God’s people that their own resources were inadequate. They had to learn to trust their God. Reflect on where your spiritual journey is taking you today—through the desert? into captivity in Babylon? into the Promised Land? Pray for faith. Pray with faith.**

Basically, this defines the Exodus experience:

1. *Captive people unable to gain their freedom.* Israelites (Exodus 1)
2. *An unlikely hero whose misgivings about himself are shared by many.* Moses (Exodus 2—4)
3. *An intransigent, despotic ruler who won’t budge.* Pharaoh (Exodus 6)
4. *Some fairly dramatic convincing of the ruler.* Plagues (Exodus 7—11)
5. *The departure of nobodies bound for nowhere.* Exodus (Exodus 12:31—13)
6. *The obligatory chase scene.* Pharaoh’s Chariots (Exodus 14:5-14)
7. *Adventures in water management.* Red (Reed) Sea (Exodus 14:15—15:21)
8. *Sighs of relief; wails of discontent.* Human nature (Exodus 15:1—16:3)
9. *Fast food, Sinai-style.* Manna and Quail (Exodus 16:4-36)
10. *Laying down the law.* Ten Commandments (Exodus 19—20)
11. *Idol minds are the devil’s workshop.* Golden Calf (Exodus 32)
12. *Setting things right and journeying on.* Covenant (Exodus 33)

This is not merely the story of a people; this is the story of us all. The Exodus isn’t one moment in history; it is history. All of us together and each of us individually live it out again and again. The Exodus themes are both universal and timely. We are all held bound at some point by a condition or situation we feel powerless to change (#1). Often, the instrument of

change is an improbable, even doubtful, choice (#2). Once released from bondage, the road ahead is not always clear (#5), but the desert experience is only too real (#8). Success lies in staying focused on God, recalling previous signs of divine direction (#4, 6, 7, 9) as indications that God will continue to act in the pesky present and on into the foggy future. We don’t always live up to our own expectations, much less God’s (#11), but the journey toward the Promised Land continues (#12).

Describing the Exodus in a single word is easy and obvious: freedom. For the Israelites, it was physical freedom from wrenching slavery. For the rest of us, it is more a metaphorical or symbolic freedom from a variety of circumstances and conditions. “Egypt” has come to symbolize slavery; the “Promised Land,” liberty. Between the two stretch tortuous miles of uncompromising desert. After setting out resolutely on our faith journey, we are sometimes tempted to return to “Egypt” on the grounds that, while life there might have been awful, at least we knew what to expect. Better yet, we were alive and likely to remain so (Exodus 16:2-3; 17:2-3). The journey is hard; the destination distant. It was then; it is now.

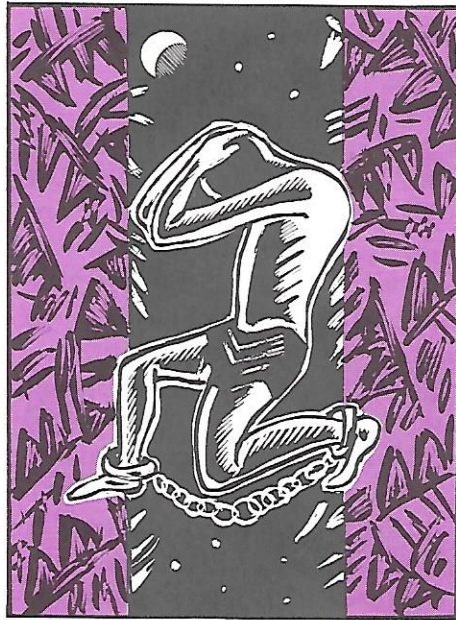
But along the way the Israelites learned some valuable lessons. They came to dramatically new understandings of the nature of their God and their

relationship with that God, as well as of their relationships with each other. At no other time in salvation history did the chosen people seem to be living in such close proximity to God. This was not, however, viewed with unrelieved delight. The Israelites apparently thought coming smack up against truth in its purest form rather daunting, preferring to hear God's message filtered through Moses' lips to getting the word up close and personal (Exodus 20:18-21). Knowing about God may still be less confrontational and impose fewer challenges than knowing God.

God's people came to grips with what was expected of them at Mount Sinai when Moses stepped away from the smoke- and cloud-shrouded peak carrying the tablets of the Decalogue (Ten Commandments). Interpreted figuratively, the mist of earlier ages is dispelled instantly by the arrival of the Law. Centuries later, Matthew's Gospel would place Jesus, the new Moses, on a similar mountain to deepen and broaden many Decalogue concepts (Matthew 5—7). (See *Scripture from Scratch*, November 1994: "From Mount Sinai to the Sermon on the Mount.") As the core of Hebraic ethical and moral law emerged from Israel's peak experience, so the heart of Christian ethics and morality arose from Jesus' Sermon on the Mount, further developing our understanding of the nature of God and our relationship with that God and one another. The Exodus continues.

Exile: A Bleak Arrival

Although no precise date for the Exodus has so far been determined, prevailing opinion generally places it in the 13th century B.C.E. The time frame for the second crucial event in Israel's history is more certain. The Babylonian exile took place in the half-century from 587-538 B.C.E. Some seven centuries separate these two great migrations, but far more than time divides them. Where the Exodus recounts the birth of a nation, the Exile records its death.



Though strife and stress abounded during the forty-odd years of the Exodus, hardships could be endured because the people were free and headed for a whole new life in their own land. The Exile marks the anguished end of that autonomy as the defeated Israelites are banished from that land and marched off to faraway Babylon, the seat of their conquerors' power. How had this dark hour come upon God's elect whose future had seemed so bright? Freedom's children soaring to the heights had become captivity's pawns plunging to the depths.

A maxim attributed to Augustine might shed some light: "Two criminals were crucified with Christ. One was saved; do not despair. One was not; do not presume." The same God who saved the despondent Hebrew slaves from Egypt seems unwilling to lift a finger for their self-absorbed descendants. Had they really become so pre-

sumptuous? One person certainly thought so. His name was Jeremiah.

The prophet Jeremiah began to speak for God in the year 626 B.C.E. By that time, the Israelites consisted of those who remained after mighty Assyria had killed or deported their compatriots in the north in 721. Known as Judahites, they had become increasingly complacent, overconfident, even arrogant. Their most flagrant sin was idolatry, the worship of many gods. Minimally, this presumed on the nature of God and called into serious question the people's allegiance. At worst, it demonstrated blatant disregard for the Second Commandment. There seemed to be a prevailing air of smugness. The God who loved them enough to save them from the ugly Assyrians would surely not get bent out of shape over a little thing like idolatrous worship. Wrong, thundered Jeremiah.

Jeremiah was never overly enthused about being a prophet (see Jeremiah 1:4-10), an understandable mindset since in the course of his career he was tried for blasphemy, locked in stocks, dumped in a dry cistern, ostracized and deported. For all his reluctance, though, he took his vocation extremely seriously. Jeremiah uses the name of the Lord over 700 times in the book bearing his name, and most of those are variations of, "The Lord says...."

Nor were his messages obscure and ambiguous. "'You entered and defiled my land; you made my heritage loathsome.... Therefore will I yet accuse you,' says the Lord" (Jeremiah 2:7b, 9a). "Roam the streets of Jerusalem; look



Living the Scriptures

■ All of us have met people whose faith so undergirded every facet of their lives that a sea of serenity seemed to engulf them. Do others see you as a faith-filled individual? Find some way to let the quiet strength of faith in God shine through your activities.

about and observe. Search through her public places to find even one who lives uprightly and seeks to be faithful, and I will pardon her. Though they say, 'As the Lord lives,' they swear falsely" (Jeremiah 5:1-2).

Jeremiah pleaded, begged, cajoled, threatened. Nothing took, and the Judahites awoke one morning to find Nebuchadnezzar and his Babylonian buddies at the gate. Following a distinctly unpleasant siege, the invaders swarmed through Jerusalem, flattening everything from Solomon's magnificent temple to the protective city walls. Glancing over their shoulders at the scorched earth of their Promised Land and plodding mile after arduous mile around the Fertile Crescent toward Babylon, God's people surely thought they were living out the final chapter of their history—and with no one to blame but themselves. The Book of Lamentations, written at about this time and attributed to Jeremiah although not authored by him, bemoans the losses and rues the decadence that produced them.

he turned to pulling his people up by their sandal straps and making their years in Babylon much more than an exercise in bleak defeat and abandonment. As the heirs to the tradition, we owe a great deal to Ezekiel. Under his leadership, many of the books which make up the Hebrew Scriptures were preserved in writing for the first time. Places of prayer and sacred reading called synagogues may have originated at this time as God's people relearned their history, privileges and responsibilities.

Ezekiel promised a great future, symbolized by the vision of the dry bones (Ezekiel 37). God would scoop up his repentant people and take them home. The joy of that moment is preserved in Psalm 126. That joy may well have been short-lived as the returnees surveyed their demolished city and calculated the work ahead. Still, they were home; they had survived. Best of all, they were still God's people; Yahweh was still their God.

part of people better equipped to face the future. As we remarked at the outset, that's life—then and now—for our ancestors in the faith, for ourselves and for all those who will trace their own paths of exodus and exile. The only certainty as we ride that perpetual pendulum swinging between gain and pain, virtue and vice, victory and defeat is the unfailing presence of God. That's enough. ■

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**Next: A Kaleidoscope of Biblical Women
(by Macrina Scott, O.S.F.)**

Up from Slavery—Again

In Babylon, still another unlikely hero awaited them, a priest-prophet named Ezekiel. Like Jeremiah, Ezekiel had raised the alarm. His warnings now vindicated,

Highs and Lows Even Out

The Exodus may have been Israel's peak experience, but it wasn't without its pain, discouragement and drudgery. The Exile may have been Israel's darkest hour, but from it sprang a rebirth in faith and commitment on the



Talking About Scripture

- **Recall a time when you found yourself overcome by the magnitude of some situation and, after exhausting the resources at your disposal, turned the outcome over to God unconditionally. As difficult as it was, do you now see it as a period of growth in your spiritual life? Share that experience so that others might benefit from it.**



Reading About Scripture

- **McBride, Alfred, O. Praem. *The Ten Commandments: Sounds of Love From Sinai*. Cincinnati: St. Anthony Messenger Press, 1990.**
- **Rohr, Richard, and Joseph Martos. *The Great Themes of Scripture: Old Testament*. Cincinnati: St. Anthony Messenger Press, 1987.**