

EXODUS

Introduction

I see no reason to dispute the tradition – which was affirmed by Jesus (Mark 12:26; Luke 20:37, Luke 24:7; John 5:46) – that the first five books of the OT were written by Moses. Certainly he had 39 years in which to write them.

Chapters 1-19 describe God's rescue of his people from Egypt and the remainder of the book concerns the covenant God made with his people at Mount Sinai. So the book is about rescue from human bondage and the (attempted) rescue from sins bondage. In Egypt the Israelites were Pharaoh's servants, after their deliverance they became God's servants.

I take seriously the description of the rapid increase of the Israelite population in northeast Egypt, the Egyptian population control plan that involved killing male infants, the descriptions of Moses' access to Pharaoh in spite of his being a mere slave-class representative from the Egyptian point of view, the plagues, the national (and international) escape from Egypt followed by a determined pursuit of chariot-mounted Egyptian troops, and the miraculously enabled encampment of the people at Mount Sinai, a place that otherwise did not have (and to this day does not have) a water supply capable of supporting so many thousands, let alone an active volcano.

Firstly, the theology of Exodus is about liberation from bad servitude to good servitude. Once the Israelites arrived at Sinai, they were reminded of the horrors of servitude to those who would oppress them if they failed to keep Yahweh's covenant. The generation that followed the exodus likewise faced the prospect that disobedience to the rules graciously and protectively revealed in the divine covenant would lead to oppression under enemies who would conquer and enslave the chosen nation. Of course, that's exactly what eventually happened.

In the New Covenant in Christ, bondage to the greatest power, sin, and its consequence, death, constitutes the "last enemy." But this is not merely a New Covenant concept. Sin is whatever offends God, and sin is an enslaver. But this slavery can be escaped—not by skill or cunning but by changing masters from sin to God. This comes about not by human initiative but by God's gift, to which humans can only respond. In Exodus, likewise, freedom from bondage is accomplished only by God. The Israelites are portrayed as having no chance whatever to save themselves. God must make the demands ("Let my people go!"); the people on their own, with or without Moses, would never have dared even asked. Moreover, God makes those demands through his chosen representative Moses so that the people cannot take credit for having thought up the idea themselves. Not only so, but when the people were reconfronted with the possibility of being opposed by the Egyptians, they became afraid. Indeed, later in the wilderness, when the going became hard, some of them actually rationalized their way to thinking that they were better off in Egypt than free from it. People need both a Savior and a Lord. They cannot do without either. Exodus reveals God as for Israel and for all who will join Israel, as many did upon seeing his mighty acts unleashed against the Egyptian oppressors.

Secondly, the theology of Exodus is about God's revelation of himself – e.g. Exodus 6:7-8.

Thirdly, the theology of Exodus is about a covenant people. The Israelites were supposed to show what it meant to be a covenant people as a preparation for the New Covenant, but they failed.

Although the fall of humanity as described in Genesis 3 corrupted the ability of humans to function properly in the image of God, the divine plan of redemption was hardly thwarted. It took the form of the calling of Abraham and the promises to him of a special people. In both Exod 6:6–8 and 19:4–6 God reiterates his plan to develop a people that will be his very own, a special people that, in distinction from all other peoples of the earth, will belong to him and accomplish his purposes, being as Exod 19:6 says “a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.” Since the essence of holiness is belonging to God, by belonging to God this people became holy, reflecting the character of their Lord as well as being obedient to his purposes. No other nation in the ancient world ever claimed Yahweh as its God, and Yahweh never claimed any other nation as his people. This is not to say that he did not love and care for other nations but only to say that he chose Israel as the focus of his plan of redemption for the world.

In the New Testament, Israel becomes all who will place faith in Jesus Christ—not an ethnic or political entity at all but now a spiritual entity, a family of God. Thus the New Testament speaks of the true Israel as defined by conversion to Christ in rebirth and not by physical birth at all. But in the Old Covenant, the true Israel was the people group that, from the various ethnic groups that gathered at Sinai, agreed to accept God’s covenant and therefore to benefit from this abiding presence among them (see comments on Exod 33:12–34:28). Exodus is the place in the Bible where God’s full covenant with a nation—as opposed to a person or small group—emerges, and the language of Exod 6:7, “I will take you as my own people, and I will be your God,” is language predicting that covenant establishment.

Fourthly, the theology of Exodus is about the Promised Land. “I will bring you to the land I swore with uplifted hand to give to Abraham, to Isaac and to Jacob. I will give it to you as a possession. I am the LORD” (Exod 6:8).

Since the time of the Patriarchs it had been the hope of Israel to occupy a land of its own—not because the idea had occurred to Abraham and his family and then had taken on a life of its own but because God revealed it as his intention and reiterated it to each successive generation. In Exodus that divine promise becomes the basis for an expectation of deliverance from Egypt, which constitutes the beginning of a great journey undertaken by a whole people with all their possessions, including their livestock, to relocate to that new land, one described metaphorically as “flowing with milk and honey,” so rich and proper would it be for them.

Fifthly the theology of Exodus is about God’s limited presence in Israel’s midst.

“ ‘Do not come any closer,’ God said. ‘Take off your sandals, for the place where you are standing is holy ground’ ” (Exod 3:5).

“Put limits for the people around the mountain and tell them, ‘Be careful that you do not go up the mountain or touch the foot of it. Whoever touches the mountain shall surely be put to death’ ” (Exod 19:12).

“Aaron and his sons must wear them whenever they enter the Tent of Meeting or approach the altar to minister in the Holy Place, so that they will not incur guilt and die. This is to be a lasting ordinance for Aaron and his descendants” (Exod 28:43).

God shows himself to his covenant people by symbols behind barriers. He doesn't fully disclose himself in the way that New Covenant believers can look forward to in heaven.

Rather, God puts *symbols* of himself (a visible brilliance associated with his glory; the gold-surfaced ark of the covenant) behind *barriers* that keep his people from direct access even to those symbols, let alone to the very God of gods that they symbolize. These barriers include such things as distance (God normally comes to the top of Mount Sinai while the people are strictly forbidden to go anywhere above the base of the mountain), darkness (God usually "appears" within a thick, dark cloud that conceals most of his glory and through which no human eyes can penetrate), and the tabernacle itself (with its layers of thick curtains and hide covers, its special floor-to-ceiling curtain shielding the ark from view by everyone, even priests).

Sixthly the theology Of Exodus comprises representing an invisible God by visible symbols. "Place the cover on top of the ark and put in the ark the Testimony, which I will give you. There, above the cover between the two cherubim that are over the ark of the Testimony, I will meet with you and give you all my commands for the Israelites" (Exod 25:21–22).

This is different to idolatry when we limit God by attempting to make representations of Him e.g. Aaron and the golden calf.

If God is omniscient, he is obviously aware of all events by being able to observe all events and should not be portrayed as having only one set of humanlike eyes or one pair of ears or one mouth to speak in one direction to one group of people. When Zechariah (3:9; 4:10) and John (Rev 5:6) spoke of God's many eyes, they were symbolizing the fact that God's omniscience means that he cannot be depicted accurately or helpfully by a typical idol. His easy awareness of all things at once, unlike any idol, makes him a subject for which idolatry is completely inappropriate.

Exodus begins the biblical process of helping us to understand how it might be that God could be symbolized, though never properly idolized.

Seventhly the theology of Exodus shows the necessity of Law. "Now if you obey me fully and keep my covenant, then out of all nations you will be my treasured possession.... Do not be afraid. God has come to test you, so that the fear of God will be with you to keep you from sinning" (Exod 19:5; 20:20).

God is a guide, and his Law gives guidance. Human law gives guidance for living peacefully and productively within a community. Divine law does this as well but goes far beyond it, to give guidance as to how to be holy within a covenant (kinship) relationship with a holy God.

Exodus provides divine law in a covenant framework, starting with the Ten Words that summarize everything, followed by the so-called Covenant Code (chaps. 21–23) giving much more detail and dozens of examples of how the Law was to be performed and enforced.

Eighthly, the theology of Exodus shows the necessity of following God.

"In all the travels of the Israelites, whenever the cloud lifted from above the tabernacle, they would set out; but if the cloud did not lift, they did not set out—until the day it lifted. So

the cloud of the LORD was over the tabernacle by day, and fire was in the cloud by night, in the sight of all the house of Israel during all their travels” (Exod 40:36–38).

These are the final words of the book of Exodus. They cap a long story of following God. As Moses followed God, the people followed Moses.

Ninthly, the theology of Exodus shows that only God has any real power. “I will bring judgment on all the gods of Egypt. I am the LORD” (Exod 12:12).

The Egyptians believed in many different gods. God needed something powerful to enable them to escape from this enculturation. In Exodus God shows His power easily, comprehensively, impressively, dramatically, publicly, decisively—he demonstrates his total control over all aspects of the physical world that were thought by the Egyptians to be the province of “the gods of Egypt.” He shows that the supposed gods of the Nile, or the sun, or the wind, or of various other parts or players in the world have no strength, no will, no effectiveness of any kind. Their power was illusory. They couldn’t even help the Egyptians prevail against well-subjugated slaves; they couldn’t control the phenomena of nature that they were supposed to be coterminous with and supposed to inhabit uniquely through their pantheistic divinity.

By the time Yahweh was finished the Egyptians were begging the Israelites to leave Egypt.

Chapter 1

The beginning of chapter 1 is a transition from the end of Genesis where Joseph has just died. Many of the original audience wouldn’t have known all these details because of their long captivity in Egypt. These materials were probably composed by Moses during the wilderness wanderings for the benefit of such people and to serve as a permanent record.

This transitional-introductory material in chaps. 1–2 is composed of six component parts:

- (1) First comes an opening genealogy (1:1–6) of the twelve tribes of Israel, featuring the twelve sons of Jacob and thus connecting the story of the exodus with the patriarchal narratives that comprise the bulk (chaps. 12–50) of Genesis. The fact that this opening genealogy mentions the descent of Jacob’s family into Egypt is part of its transitional character.
- (2) Next comes a brief section describing how the descendants of Jacob grew into a large nation and eventually came under Egyptian bondage (1:7–14). This information informs the alert reader that the promises of great growth to Abraham’s descendants—restated, as carefully noted in Genesis (e.g., 26:3–4; 46:3) to both Abraham’s son and grandson—are in active process of fulfillment. It also orients the reader to how it could come about that the people of Israel should be subject to such extreme loathing that
- (3) they would become, as described in the following section (1:15–22), the targets of a vicious genocidal campaign by the new pharaoh, with the goal of controlling the population of the Israelites through male infanticide.
- (4) At the beginning of chap. 2 (2:1–10) Moses described his birth and, more importantly for the salvation theme that dominates the entire first half of the book, the unusual circumstances that led to his being found by one of the Egyptian princesses and raised as an Egyptian yet nursed by his own mother and well aware of the plight of his own ethnic people.
- (5) The fifth element (2:11–22) is the story of Moses’ own exodus/exile from Egypt, in which he was forced to flee for his life as a criminal sought for murder because he sided with his people over against his office as an Egyptian princeling. This covers a forty-year period,

during which Moses got married, settled in Midianite territory in the Sinai wilderness, and assumed the life of a shepherd within the overall estate of his father-in-law. By this turn of events, Moses was allowed to understand both the experience of fleeing Egypt and a great deal about survival in the Sinai wilderness, knowledge that constituted part of God's preparation of him to assume the position of leader of God's deliverance.

(6) A brief summative reminder (2:23–25) then draws the first two chapters to a close. These concluding three verses remind the reader of two things especially: the severity of the oppression the Israelites endured for many decades and the fact that in spite of their long sojourn in foreign territory and their long period of suffering, God had not forgotten them but was indeed deeply concerned for the plight of his people.

Verses 1-6

It's appropriate that the book begins with a list of names – the Hebrew name for this book means “these are the names”. Also as I've said Moses wanted to make sure that this book was seen as a continuation of Genesis.

Verse 5 makes it clear that the great nation of Israel coming out of Egypt had gone in as only 70.

Verse 6 Genesis ends with the death of Joseph and indeed this end implies that Joseph was the last of the brothers to die.

Verses 7-14 explain how Israel came under Egyptian bondage.

The rapid growth of the population was a fulfillment of God's covenant with Abraham, but it also led to their bondage. God had foreseen this when he spoke to Abraham. God's blessings are often at odds with the values and purposes of those who don't know him.

Joseph probably came to power during the time of the Hyksos (Asiatic) Pharaoh's (1750 – 1550 BC) probably around 1700-1650 BC, and after they were overthrown a hatred of foreigners is understandable. Also it's very understandable that the new leaders wouldn't like those who served the old leaders in a senior capacity.

Although the Exodus is the central event of Israel's history it is very difficult to define where and when it took place. The most likely period is the first half of the 13th century BC because (i) the Israel stele of Pharaoh Merneptah claims that he subdued Israel in Canaan in around 1209 BC, thus the Exodus must have taken place at least some fifty or sixty years before that, and (ii) the store city of Raamses referred to in Exodus 1:11 is most likely Pi-Rameses built by Rameses II just after 1300 BC and the Exodus must have taken place after that.

Verse 10 suggests that Egyptian policy was to limit population growth and stop the Israelites becoming even more numerous. The NIV translation “to leave the country” could better be rendered “to dominate the land” or “take possession of the land”.

Verse 11 – the Pharaoh's proposal was accepted. The Israelites became a suppressed race – slave labour.

Moses mentioned the fact that during this time the Israelites were the group used to build two entire cities, Pithom and Rameses, which he described as “store cities.” Pithom has been commonly identified with Egyptian *prtm*, that is, “house of 'Tum” [= house of the god Atum], a city known to have been located somewhere to the east of Wadi Tumilat and thus

likely where either Tel el-Maskutah or Tel er-Ratabah are known today, and possibly at or near Heliopolis. The city of Rameses, on the other hand, is commonly thought to bear in its name the Hebrew reflex of Egyptian “house of Ramses,” but it may in fact have derived originally from *ri’amsēs*, meaning “Re created it/him.” It was a royal city the pharaohs of the Nineteenth and Twentieth Dynasties occupied, that is, the royal residence of the Ramessides in the delta region from about 1300 to about 1100 BC. In Gen 47:11 “Rameses” seems to function as a metonymy for the entire land of Goshen. Many scholars have thus assumed that the region is given that name somewhat anachronistically, based on the later Israelite knowledge of the chief city of the region, the place mentioned in Exod 12:37 and Num 33:3–5 as the departure point for the exodus. By this understanding, it would eventually have replaced “Avaris” in the biblical text for the convenience of later readers, much as “New York” eventually replaced the original “New Amsterdam” in the evolving nomenclature of colonial America. However, there is no reason to rule out the possibility that the city that Ramses later “constructed” and perhaps called “house of Ramses,” was in fact a rebuilding and expansion of the earlier *ri’amsēs*. This would be consistent with Ramses’ extensive building and rebuilding efforts in many parts of Egypt, and the way that new dynasties often rebuilt cities to their liking and/or to new strategic uses, so that many cities show evidence of several major and many minor reconstructions over their history. This description raises two questions, the answers to which remain somewhat speculative.

First, where were the two cities located? It is reasonable to speculate that they were built near the land of Goshen, that is, in the eastern Delta, close to the Sinai peninsula, since this was the heart of the Israelite territory and the place where the largest concentration of Israelite slave workers could be found. The answer to the second question is that while they certainly were “store” or even “treasure” cities in the sense of being places where valuable assets of various sorts from the point of view of the kingdom were kept, they were also *de facto* probably *military* store cities by reason of being built in the northeast corner of the country at the area where invasion would first come from Asia, that is, the direction of the earlier invasion that had taken place under the Asiatic Hyksos—the direction of Egypt’s most feared potential enemies. Today we would call these “royal garrison cities” or “fortified border settlements.” They presumably contained not only quarters, provisions, and weaponry for the limited number of troops and their dependents and civilian support population that occupied them during peacetime but also additional facilities to accommodate and equip troops that could be rushed to them in war or the threat thereof. The Israelites were therefore assigned the monumental task of building entire special areas of cities from the ground up, supplying not only the labor but also the materials.

Verses 12-13 The oppression policy backfired – instead of reducing the Israelite population it kept increasing. The opposition was increased, but it had the opposite effect of what would be expected.

Verse 14 The Egyptians kept increasing their oppression. “work” Hebrew root word *abad* later used for service to Yahweh – at this point Israel was under the control of Pharaoh.

Verses 15-22 Much time has elapsed. Now begins the penultimate stage of the forced population control program—directly killing Israelites. It is not quite the ultimate stage because the pharaoh was at this point trying to get Israelites themselves (i.e., midwives) to kill Israelites (i.e., male newborns) subtly, whereas the ultimate state comes with v. 22, where children are killed openly by Egyptians themselves.

These verses are about Moses – he was endangered by the birth control programme but was saved. Recent archaeological evidence supports this as graveyards consisting almost entirely of females has been found.

The midwives were probably named as heroines in Israel’s early history because they helped defeat Pharaoh’s objectives. Their names mean Dawn or Fair and Fragrant or Splendid. They were surely just the senior midwives.

Verse 19 the midwives have prepared a reply which may not have been entirely a lie.

Verse 22 the final stage of the genocide, no more subterfuge. The Nile was like a sewer and took away anything that wasn’t wanted. It was also the giver and taker of life.

A proleptic irony follows from this approach to killing the Israelite baby boys. Later God would kill large numbers of grown-up boys, that is, Egyptian soldiers, by drowning them in the Red Sea (e.g., Exod 15:4: “Pharaoh’s chariots and his army he has hurled into the sea./The best of Pharaoh’s officers are drowned in the Red Sea”; Heb 11:29: “By faith the people passed through the Red Sea as on dry land; but when the Egyptians tried to do so, they were drowned”).

Chapter 2

Verse 1

Shows that Moses was a Levite – very appropriate for his future calling to provide religious and spiritual leadership.

Verse 2

Could better be translated she wanted or longed to keep him [her son]

Verse 3

Hebrew word *tebah* best translated *ark* rather than basket – this word is only elsewhere found in the Genesis accounts of the flood.

Indeed, it is hard to imagine that Moses was not keenly aware of the obvious comparison between himself and Noah. They both were deliverers/rescuers who were called by God to lead people and animals through and out of danger into a new location where those people and animals would become dominant in establishing a new stage of God’s unfolding plan of redemption of the world.

This ark was made of papyrus (as perhaps were many items of furniture in Egypt since virtually all of the population lived close to the Nile, where papyrus grew abundantly; wood was very costly, available mainly by importation by sea). It may have been a piece of storage furniture that Moses’ parents already owned or that they bought for this new, special purpose. Jochebed’s special contribution was sealing it with tar (bitumen/asphalt, abundant in many places in Egypt) and pitch (a term used for various sorts of tar mixtures and tarry substances, possibly plant sap, though less likely actual tree sap in light of the paucity of larger trees in Egypt). Nothing in the text suggests that this was an especially brilliant or especially desperate method of attempting to hide a baby—only that Moses’ mother was doing her best to protect him.

Verse 4

This introduces Miriam. The family was together in protecting Moses. Miriam was probably older than Aaron (who was 3 at this time) – Exodus 7:7. Miriam was probably between 6 and 12 (older and she'd have been expected to work younger and incapable of participating as she did).

Verses 5-6

Moses is discovered, but God delivers him in a wonderful way. The Nile was sacred for the Egyptians, no doubt that's why Pharaoh's daughter came to bathe in it. Her recognition that Moses was a Hebrew boy (*yeled*, which the NIV unfortunately neuter both times in this verse to "baby") probably was predicated on four things at least: the general physical differences between Hebrews and Egyptians, the type of baby clothes used, the fact that her discovery occurred in an Israelite settlement area, and the general situation (the need to hide Israelite baby boys but not Egyptian baby boys).

Verses 7-8

Miriam controlled the action: she apparently didn't run when the Egyptian women arrived but remained at her post and affected curiosity when the baby was found. She must have been close enough to the action to overhear the princess's various expressions of concern for the boy (e.g., "He's crying!" "He must be hungry!" "I can't leave him like this!"), and Miriam wisely volunteered a wet nurse she knew well (her own mother). The turning point of the story is contained in a one-word command, that of the princess: "Go"! With that decision of the king's daughter, Moses' protection was assured.

Verses 9-10

God's special provision for Moses cannot be missed. The baby boy once in grave peril received royal protection, his own mother raised him in his early years, she was actually paid to care for him, and the princess formally adopted him as evidenced by her giving him an Egyptian name. Pharaoh's daughter didn't seem to worry about contradicting her Father's orders, she had no hesitation in doing what she did.

The boy must have remained with his mother at this stage (and there's no question of her being invited into Pharaoh's household) – Pharaoh's daughter says take the boy away *hiphil of halak*. Normally babies were nursed for several years before weaning.

Moses is eventually adopted into Pharaoh's household, but Moses probably continued to have contact with his family. He's given a common name meaning "son" or "to beget a son" because it sounds something like *mōšēh*, the active participle of the verb *māšāh*, "draw out," which connects to the circumstances of Moses' discovery and being "drawn out" of the water.

Moses' own exile or exodus is described in verses 11-22. This portion of the narrative takes the story of Moses from his own childhood to that of his (first) child, from living as a foreigner in an urban Egyptian royal household to living as a foreigner in a rural Midianite priestly household, and from the privilege of a princeling of the greatest nation of his world to the obscurity of criminal exile in the Sinai wilderness. It also brings the reader to the point of preparation for the exodus, with its concluding declaration by Moses of being "an alien in a foreign land" (v. 22).

Verses 11-12

The story jumps ahead 36 or so years. His childhood and adolescence had nothing to contribute to the story, so it's skipped over (note how Jesus' childhood and adolescence were skipped over in the gospels).

These two verses explain how Moses had by this time identified with the Israelites over against the Egyptians and how his zeal against the oppression of his people got him into trouble. This was his first attempt at delivering his people—acting alone and in secret and relying on his own strength and wisdom—and though it failed miserably, it certainly shows the strength of Moses' sentiments on behalf of his people. Twice in v. 11 the phrase *'eḥāyw*, “his own people” (lit., “his brothers”), serves to orient the reader to the fact that Moses saw himself by this point as an Israelite, not an Egyptian.

There appears to be thus some degree of premeditation in Moses' act, as indicated in the statement that “he looked this way and that” (NIV “glancing” gives the incorrect impression that Moses did the whole thing on the spur of the moment). Hiding the man in the sand would be a rather natural thing to do since burying a body is the fastest, best way to conceal it in a part of the world characterized by little foliage, a largely flat terrain, and plenty of sand.

Verses 13-14

Tell us why Moses had to leave Egypt. In hindsight Moses could admit to weakness: not only the weakness of being afraid, but also the weakness of being rejected by the man who said, “Who made you ruler and judge over us?”—clearly an expression of resentment against this johnny-come-lately styling himself as a defender of the Hebrews. It is not difficult to imagine why Moses was disliked or why the news about his murderous act had spread so far so fast: an Egyptian overseer was missing, an investigation probably was underway or soon would be, and there was every likelihood that the Hebrews would be blamed and severely punished for the overseer's murder. Such a situation would become the talk of the community and would easily surface someone's admission, “I saw who did it!” What Moses had tried to do had, from his people's point of view, backfired. He had taken matters into his own hands, and his arrogance in doing so probably was going to get a lot of people in trouble.

The Hebrew who in this instance spoke back to him, however, in effect anticipated the later attitude of the leaders of the Hebrews, who would repeatedly look at what Moses was trying to do as damaging to their interests, in spite of the fact that Moses would intend it as deliverance (5:19–21; Exod 17:3; Num 14:2; Deut 1:27). This is in the nature of leadership: the best attempts to help are sometimes faulty in themselves, yet even when proper and magnanimous, they can provoke the resentment of those who fail to appreciate how they are being led. As would often be the case with Jesus, Moses was here not recognized/accepted readily by his own people. He eagerly wanted to help them; they were suspicious that he represented trouble.

Verse 15

Moses was in danger of death at various times by various persons. The earlier story of his rescue as a baby reflects a general attempt to kill Israelite male children, Moses included. Now he is sought for murder by a presumably enraged Pharaoh, since testimony during the investigation of the crime must have pointed directly to Moses, and the king could hardly have been unmoved by the implications of a turncoat Hebrew-raised-as-an-Egyptian now killing Egyptian work supervisors! Later, Moses would be threatened with death from his own people (e.g., Exod 17:4), and his firstborn son, threatened by God himself (see comments on 4:24–26).

But, it's all part of God's plan.

Where, then, could he go that would be relatively safe from Egyptian influence, relatively hospitable to an Israelite (speaking a related language and sharing some customs), and relatively easy to get to from northeast Egypt, where his flight originated? Even in the short time Moses probably had to gather his things and flee, the answer must have seemed obvious to him: Midian. The Midianites were descended from Abraham through his wife Keturah (Gen 25:2) and occupied sparsely (i.e., to the extent that such regions can support population) portions of the central and northern Sinai peninsula in addition to their main location, northwestern Arabia, so that Midianites could be encountered in that day from the Arabian gulf in the south to the plains of Moab in the north. Though the Midianites in most of their history were enemies of the Israelites (as were most other Semitic groups as well), a single Israelite on the run from Egypt, a country that had often tried to dominate the Midianites, would not necessarily represent a threat but perhaps even something of a kindred spirit. Moreover, the relatively independent and isolated Midianites were just the sort of people to seek refuge among for a fugitive like Moses.

The final clause, "where he sat down by a well," brings the story to a specific location, where the fugitive, looking for some place to settle, will have yet another opportunity to intervene in a dispute on behalf of the oppressed and in so doing will also begin to meet those with whom he will live and work for the next forty years. In the largely barren Sinai wilderness, a well was a necessity for human and domesticated animal life, a meeting place, a community center; roads led to it, and travelers sought it out. For Moses, "a certain well" would be the beginning point of a new life.

Verses 16-19

Having to flee from Egypt hadn't blunted Moses' for intervening against injustice. He acted even though alone and with the odds against him. He may have had Egyptian military training, certainly he was physically strong enough to drive off the shepherds and do the work that seven girls were planning to do.

All of these characteristics are seen again in various ways as Moses responded to God's call to deliver the Israelites from Egypt. In other words, the Moses we see here is basically the same Moses we have already seen as an adult in Egypt and whom we will see again throughout the Pentateuch—a figure whom God continued to prepare for a great and daunting task yet for whom such a task, however potentially dispiriting, would not be something inimical to his basic nature.

These verses tell us a bit more about Moses as well. He was, though surely not yet romantically, attracted to the daughters of Reuel, the priest of Midian. Something about their looks and/or demeanor awakened his interest and concern.

Verse 20-22

An invitation to dinner leads to betrothal and we jump ahead in time to the birth of Moses' first son.

The naming of Gershom in v. 22 represents another instance of homophonous naming of a child (cf. 2:10), the name in this case suggested by its being similar in sound to the

explanation Moses provided: *gēr* (“alien”) and *šōm* (close in sound to *šām*, “there”) combining to suggest the approximate meaning “an alien there.”

From Moses’ point of view, he was now permanently separated both from what he regarded as his homeland, Egypt, and also from the people he now identified with as his own, Israel. Consider, then, the spiritual challenge that was his. He was a failure as a deliverer of his people, a failure as a citizen of Egypt, unwelcome among either of the nations he might have called his own, a wanted man, a now-permanent resident of an obscure place, alone and far from his origins, and among people of a different religion (however much or little Midianite religion may have shared some features with whatever unwritten Israelite religion existed at this time).

Verses 23-25

We’ve concluded the introduction and now the focus turns back towards Egypt.

First, the pharaoh who sought Moses’ life had died. This would make possible Moses’ return to deal with the Egyptian leadership no longer as a criminal fugitive (cf. this assurance in 4:19) but as a prophet of the true God.

Second, the change in government produced no relief for the Israelites, whose painful slavery continued unabated. Their misery is emphasized noticeably by four terms, two of them verbs (“groaned,” “cried out”) and two nouns (“cry,” “groaning”), constituting four different vocabulary words in the Hebrew, even though represented in the NIV by what would seem to be only two terms (“groan,” “cry”). The double use of the expression “because of their slavery” reinforces this, with the intention that the reader must not miss the severity of Israel’s miserable situation.

Third, the people of Israel began to pray. That is the point made by the language in v. 23 (“cried out ... their cry ... went up to God”) and v. 24 (“God heard their groaning”). This description of their prayer is central. However little the Israelites knew about God at this stage, they were praying to him. Later, in Deut 26:7, Moses summarized: “Then we cried out to the LORD, the God of our fathers, and the LORD heard our voice and saw our misery, toil and oppression.” The exodus did not come about simply because people were in trouble; it was the result of a prayer of lament for rescue to the only one who could actually do something about it. As Jesus taught, the one who knows all needs before they are prayed for nevertheless expects them to be prayed for (Matt 6:5–8, 32).

Fourth, God “remembered his covenant.” The word *bērit* (“covenant”) occurs twenty-five times in Genesis; this is its first occurrence in Exodus. The covenant in question is usually referred to as the “Abrahamic covenant” because it was made initially to Abraham and then simply renewed, without change in essentials, to both Isaac and Jacob. Here the statement “remembered his covenant with Abraham, with Isaac and with Jacob” is worded in such a way as to emphasize that renewal to each subsequent generation. God’s promises never stopped being valid even though the Israelites have had to wait 430 years.

Fifth, God was closely interested in his people and in the process of making himself known to them. Moses now mentioned God again for the first time since the account of the midwives in 1:17–20—not because God had been disinterested or irrelevant but as a way of heightening the fact that God alone was the Israelite’s hope in this situation. The best reading of the original, “God looked on them and made himself known to them,” (better than the NIV) sets

the scene for what follows. God was initiating the process of deliverance, and the circumstances of both Moses and Israel were about to change. Implicitly, the theological issue here is not whether or how people suffer; the issue is: does suffering go unnoticed? If it does not—and indeed the one doing the noticing is the true, omnipotent, and loving covenant God—his people can properly surmise that their suffering may well be part of a plan, that it is a suffering with a distinct beginning and end, a hardship understood by and watched over by a sovereign who will not let it continue without good purpose and result.

Chapter 3

Now we're going to look at God's call to Moses.

Moses' life was divided into three periods each of 40 years, the first 40 he spent in Pharaoh's court, the second 40 in the desert and the third 40 as leader of the Israelites. Where chapter 3 commences he has just spent the last 40 years in God's school of the desert – he must have felt totally abandoned by God and totally useless to him. In Egypt Moses had learned about worldly leadership, in the desert he has learned about spiritual leadership. So his time in the desert has not been wasted and God is now about to call him back to his deliverance ministry.

Let that be a lesson and a comfort to us all. God can use us even after we've failed him and He can even make use of all our failures in His plans. So we mustn't give up when we fail, but repent and remain open to God's leading.

Verse 1

We see that Moses was now so closely identified with his own ethnic people, that he was willing to serve as a shepherd, a position that no Egyptian would ever have agreed to serve in because shepherding was loathsome to the Egyptians. The fact that he was tending his father in law's flock suggests that he had not come into substantial means of his own. Here we also see that Moses was in a very remote place – the far side of the desert. Apparently he had gone West from Midianite territory, many days or probably weeks away from home to enable his sheep to take advantage of the high grassy slopes on Mount Horeb. This was very unusual for Arab shepherds in those times, but Moses was a good shepherd and God had led him to his Holy mountain.

Verses 2-3

God loves to appear to us in unexpected places and in unexpected ways and he often appears when we're engaged in the ordinary things of life. There's no indication that God had ever previously spoken to Moses during the 14,000 days he'd already spent in the desert, but now verse 2 tells us that an angel of God appeared to Moses whilst he was tending his sheep in this remote place. The angel appeared in flames of fire from within a bush – although the second part of verse 2 and verse 3 tell us that Moses didn't immediately realize what was happening. He knew it was something unusual because the bush, which the Hebrew word tells us was a very small thornbush, didn't burn up, ordinarily it would have burnt up in a minute or so, but Moses didn't yet know that this was an appearance of God. God doesn't fully reveal himself to us, but he does reveal himself to us in some fashion.

Fire is a common and useful image of our God, it's frequently a sign of God's presence. God wants to set His church on fire. His Holy Spirit came in tongues of fire at the first Pentecost which started off the church. Fire brings light, a light that enables us to see God. But fire does more than that. Malachi 3:2 says that “[God] will come like a refiners fire”. In Biblical times a refiner put metal into a furnace and heated until it melted and all the dross and

impurities came to the surface and the refiner would skim these off. The refiner would do this again and again, up to seven times, until the metal was clean and pure. He would know it was pure when he could see his face reflected in the molten metal. In the same way God refines us in his fire until he can see his image in us. Moses was refined in the fire of the desert and alienation from everything he had known. God will use the trials in our lives to refine us too.

Now God's call is a call to turn aside, to turn aside from our complacency and past failings, and here Moses decided to turn aside and go closer to see what was happening. As he made this very initial response to God's call, God revealed himself further. That's the way God works, as we respond to his call he draws us further in to his plans and purposes.

Verse 4

God calls out to Moses in what was apparently an audible voice "Moses, Moses" and Moses replied "here I am". Notice that repetition of Moses' name by God. In ancient Semitic culture that repetition of the name was a way of expressing affection and friendship, so Moses realised he was being addressed by someone who loved him and cared about him.

Verse 5

God then teaches Moses something about the Holy nature of his presence in verse 5 even before God reveals exactly who he is. Moses has to take off his sandals, which in Semitic culture was done as an acknowledgement of a superior person when you entered their dwelling. In Eastern cultures, the removal of shoes to enter a Temple is also an admission of personal defilement and conscious unworthiness to stand in the presence of a Holy God. God knows that the Israelites will have to learn about his Holy nature from Moses in due course and he's also marking out Sinai and Horeb as "his place", so the very ground is Holy. We need to remember that our God is a Holy God and he wants us to honour that.

Verse 6

In verse 6 God finally tells Moses who he is – the mighty Yahweh, God of Moses' people and Moses hides his face. Later, God would allow Moses to see him in part – but not yet.

Verses 7-10

God then turns to matters which had been very much on Moses' heart in Egypt – the bondage and slavery of his people. In verse 7 God says that he has seen their misery, heard their cries and is concerned about their suffering. God is reassuring Moses that he has been watching this situation and that he is very much aware of what is happening. In this present fallen broken world, God does allow evil and suffering. But, God does care about the bad things happening in our lives, he does care about our suffering, even if he doesn't always act immediately – remember at this point the Israelites have been suffering in slavery for hundreds of years. We should never doubt God's steadfast love for us even in the darkest days. Corrie Ten Boom's sister Betsie never doubted God's love even when she was starving and being beaten, beaten literally to death, in a German concentration camp. Corrie writes "May God grant you never to doubt his victorious love – whatever the circumstances." Returning to verse 7, at this point Moses is probably thinking that's wonderful, God knows what's happening – maybe God will finally do something!

Then in verse 8 God tells Moses that he is going to rescue the Israelites and deliver them into a wonderful place – the Promised Land, a land flowing with milk and honey – in fulfilment of God's covenant promises to Abraham. A land flowing with milk and honey speaks of God's

provision for his people, because in those times animal products like milk and honey were seen as “free gifts” of animal and insect as opposed to grain which was seen much more as a product of human labour. At this point Moses is probably thinking “That’s wonderful, thank you Lord! But, now comes the sting in the tail as Moses gets his marching orders, look at verse 10:

“So now, go. I am sending you to Pharaoh to bring my people the Israelites out of Egypt.” (Exodus 3:10 NIV)

Moses himself has to bring about the release of the Israelites. No doubt Moses had been thinking about the situation of the Israelites for years, probably he had been praying for his people. This tells us something important about prayer, sometimes God may use US to provide the answer, or at least to be part of the answer to our prayers.

Verse 11

Verse 11 is often misinterpreted, because the sense of it doesn’t really come across in English. But in Hebrew, Moses’ “Who am I” (*mi’ānōkî in the Hebrew*) is really a polite acceptance of an honour rather than an attempt to decline it. There is a parallel with the call of Gideon in Judges 6.

Verse 12

God’s reply in verse 12 both promises help and guidance (I will be with you) and also promises success (when you have brought these people out). The “you will worship God” at the end of verse 12 is also important because in the Hebrew the “you” is in the plural – so God is saying that all the people will worship him, all will come to faith in the great I AM. There’s also a bit of a play on words here between the “am I” of Moses and the “I am” of God that we turn to next – the “am I” of Moses can achieve nothing, but the “I am” can do everything.

Verses 13-15

Moses does now start to protest a little bit and asks God what he should tell the Israelites God’s name is. He’s actually saying “who are you really” and “by what authority do I go”. In verse 14 God responds tell them I AM WHO I AM. In fact the Hebrew here could also be translated “I will be who or what I will be” – God is a dynamic God – and the I AM of the Hebrew could also be rendered “I cause to be”. God’s saying I am the one true God who can be whatever he wills, your authority is that of the one true God, the one who caused everything to be. In verse 15 God states his full name – Yahweh – that’s always rendered as LORD in small capitals in our modern Bibles. It’s not completely clear from scripture whether this name of God had been known to previous generations of the Patriarchs – but God is leaving Moses in no doubt here. Now names were of huge significance to the Egyptians who believed that the name of a God encapsulated his essential nature. Egyptian magical texts talk about the significance of knowing a God’s secret name which conferred power on the user, but our God is not constrained by pagan myths – his name is no secret, he freely reveals it.

Verse 16-18

In verses 16 and 17 God tells Moses how to summarise his mission for the Israelites and predicts their acceptance in verse 18. Verse 18 appears to recommend a rather devious way of presenting their request to Pharaoh, because they don’t really want to go on a three day retreat, they want to leave permanently. But, people of Eastern cultures use suggestive, gentle, restrained, and limited ways of making requests as opposed to simply coming right out and asking for what they want. We sometimes do that in English. So, “How much

money do you have on you?” is actually a way of indicating, “I’m planning to borrow some money from you.” and we do it a lot with requests for time; “Have you got a second?” is not literal at all but really is a way of saying, “I’d like to take an indefinite amount of your time.” This is how “Let us take a three-day journey” functions in the speech Moses and the elders of Israel were to make to Pharaoh. The time they’re told to request is tiny compared to the time actually expected. “Three-day journey” was an idiom in the ancient world for “a major trip with formal consequences.” Pharaoh would have heard it that way and would also have heard it as meaning “We want to leave Egypt for however long we choose.”

Verses 19-22

So, we have to understand Pharaoh’s refusal of their request later in the Exodus story in that light. He knew full well that they were asking to leave permanently with all their possessions. Thus, it’s no surprise that in verse 19, God predicts that Pharaoh will not accept the departure of the Israelites without compulsion and that God promises in verse 20 to strike the Egyptians through Moses so as to eventually cause Pharaoh to accept. Finally in verses 21 and 22 God tells Moses that he will make the Egyptian people favourably inclined towards the Israelites and that they will leave Egypt with many riches that the Egyptian people will give them.

Here we leave Moses in his encounter with God. He hasn’t yet accepted God’s call, but we know that he will eventually accept it and lead his people to the gates of the Promised Land. We don’t know why God chooses to work with and through people in this way, but we do know that he does. God has also called us. Just before his ascension Christ commanded his disciples to go out and bear his message as Luke records in Acts 1:8:

“But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.” (Acts 1:8 NIV)

we are Christ’s disciples so this command applies to us. Just as God commanded Moses “now go” he commands us to go now and tell the world who he is, the one true mighty God who made everything in the universe, and that this God hears and sees and above all cares and wants to lead us out of our slavery and bondage to sin and into the Promised Land of eternal life with him.

Chapter 4

Moses again protests about his call, but God encourages him.

Verse 1

In Moses’ first two protests (certainly the first in verse 11) were formal, he now betrays uncertainty. God responds by giving him miraculous signs to prove his credentials. Moses wasn’t really doubting God’s promises, but he’s certainly afraid that the Israelites will doubt him.

Verse 2-5

Moses seems to welcome this sign, quickly obeying all God’s commands even when he has to grab a snake that he’s run from. I don’t think we should see the snake as symbolic of Satan. This is the beginning of God establishing that Moses’ staff symbolizes his power.

Verses 6-8

Now God gives a backup miracle. This alone shows that God knows that the Israelites will find it hard to believe Moses. Skin diseases included under the English translation leprous included not only leprosy itself but a variety of other skin diseases that were feared by the Israelites. They made great efforts not to come into contact with them.

For Moses to say, in effect, “Look what Yahweh can do with disease!” was virtually to ask, “Can any god you’ve been worshiping heal like this?”

Verse 9

This third proof-of-commission sign is of a grander sort: it anticipates the first plague (7:14–24) in which water—mainly from the Nile in the case of the plague—is turned into blood, hinting at the fact that God had in store some serious threats to unleash upon the Egyptians, which he would first demonstrate, through this sample, to his own people. The third sign, in other words, was not so much about Moses as it was about Egypt, and specifically the Nile. For God’s servant Moses to demonstrate through this simple act God’s power over the Nile would be to demonstrate God’s power generally over Egypt and the Egyptians *a fortiori*.

Verse 10

Moses’ statement in this verse has generated much misunderstanding on the part of those who have not recognized it as a ritual protest, and it has thus often been taken literally, as if Moses actually either had a speech defect or was incompetent as a public speaker or had forgotten his Egyptian. In fact, Moses did a huge amount of speaking in the remainder of the Pentateuchal narrative and law, yet nowhere did he reveal the slightest speech hesitancy or inability to make himself understood. Why, then, did he make the claim to be “slow of speech and tongue”? The answer lies not in physiology but in culture—in the style of ancient Near Eastern “exaggerated humility,” often employed in situations where one is appealing for help or mercy from someone else or showing one’s mannerly self-deprecation at being given a great assignment. The following are among the parade examples of this style in the Bible: Gen 18:26: I have been so bold as to speak to the Lord, though I am nothing but dust and ashes. (Abraham)

Exod 4:10: I have never been eloquent ... I am slow of speech and tongue. (Moses)

1 Sam 9:21: Saul answered, “But am I not a Benjamite, from the smallest tribe of Israel, and is not my clan the least of all the clans of the tribe of Benjamin? Why do you say such a thing to me?”

1 Sam 18:23: David said, “Do you think it is a small matter to become the king’s son-in-law? I’m only a poor man and little known.”

1 Sam 24:14: “Against whom has the king of Israel come out? Whom are you pursuing? A dead dog? A flea?”

1 Sam 26:20: Now do not let my blood fall to the ground far from the presence of the Lord. The king of Israel has come out to look for a flea—as one hunts a partridge in the mountains.”

2 Sam 9:8: Mephibosheth bowed down and said, “What is your servant, that you should notice a dead dog like me?”

2 Kgs 8:13: Hazael said, “How could your servant, a mere dog, accomplish such a feat?”

1 Kgs 3:7: You have made your servant king ... I am only a little child and do not know how to carry out my duties. (Solomon)

Isa 6:5: Woe is me!... For I am a man of unclean lips. (Isaiah)

Isa 56:3: And let not any [official] complain, “I am only a dry tree.”

Jer 1:6: Ah, Sovereign Lord, ... I do not know how to speak; I am only a child. (Jeremiah)

1 Cor 2:3: I came to you in weakness and fear, and with much trembling. (Paul)

Eph 3:8: Although I am less than the least of all God's people, this grace was given me.
(Paul)

1 Tim 1:15: Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners—of whom I am the worst.
(Paul)

Heb 13:22: Brothers, I urge you to bear with my word of exhortation, for I have written you only a short letter.

Of particular interest for their close parallels with Exod 4:10 are Saul's claim to be obscure in origin when he was in fact from a prominent family (1 Sam 9:21); David's claim to be a nobody when in fact he was already a popular war hero (1 Sam 18:23); Hazael's claim to be no better than a dog when he was in fact already a major leader in Syria (2 Kgs 8:13); Solomon's assertion that he was only a child when in fact he probably was at least thirty years old at the time he became king (1 Kgs 3:7); and Paul's claim to be the lowest of the low among God's people (Eph 3:8; 1 Tim 1:15) when in fact he was an influential apostle. The closest parallel of all is that of Jeremiah's protest (Jer 1:6), in which he claimed to be unable to talk, something he then did quite eloquently for the next forty-one years.

All of these parallels point to the simple fact that Moses was not speaking literally here but figuratively, responding to a great assignment with the proper sort of exaggerated humility and self-effacement expected and valued in his culture. There is no evidence anywhere in the Bible that he had any lack of skill in speech, public or private—and overwhelming evidence to the contrary.

Verses 11-12

This is both an answer to Moses and a general encouragement (since God also mentions his power over human sight and hearing).

Verse 13-14

No loner a ritual protest – but we can't evade God's calling remember Jonah. That's why God is now angry with Moses. However, the NIV mistranslates v14, it might better be rendered:

“Even though the Lord was angry with Moses, he said, ‘Is not Aaron your Levite brother? I know ...’”

God's still responding in grace even though he's not pleased.

Verses 15-17

Verse 15 makes clear that both Moses and Aaron would speak for God, and this was in fact the case. Moses eventually did the vast majority of the speaking, with virtually no mention made of Aaron's public speaking beyond the early chapters of Exodus—but at first Aaron was either speaking for him or with him (4:30; 5:1). Presumably, as Moses' courage and faith increased, the need for Aaron's close collegial support and/or public representation of his brother lessened. Verses 15 and 16 together also suggest that, from the first, Moses was the true prophet (the one into whose mind God placed his words with the intent that they be passed on to others) and that Aaron was Moses' spokesperson rather than a direct recipient of God's revelation.

Verse 18

Moses returns to Egypt. He's really seeking a blessing from Jethro. As a son-in-law he would desire the blessing of his wife's father, both because he was taking Zipporah with him (4:20) and because he owed decades of hospitality to this Midianite priest. Otherwise, Moses' language was more a matter of politely informing Jethro of his intentions (“let me go back to

my own people in Egypt”) and providing a socially appropriate reason (“to see if any of them are still alive”).

Verses 19-20

Moses life would no longer be in danger in Egypt, he was no longer a fugitive criminal.

Verses 21-23

Here God links his firstborn son, Israel, with the firstborn of Pharaoh.

The firstborn son in the ancient world was the one specially favored with inheritance, the one who would represent the father in many ways as he came into maturity and the father gave him more and more responsibility. Moreover, in ancient Israelite society the firstborn son, as the firstfruits of a marriage, was devoted to God—he belonged specially to God and could not even be taken and raised by his parents without the payment of a special redemption or “buy back” fee that symbolized the family’s recognition that the son was by rights Yahweh’s and not theirs (see comments on 13:2, 13). Until entering into his special, double inheritance (Deut 21:17), the firstborn son “served” his father. The verb in 4:23 of the NIV translated as “worship” (“Let my son go that he may worship me”) is *‘abad*, normally translated as “work, serve” elsewhere. The Israelites had been serving Pharaoh; now God told Pharaoh that the Israelites were going to serve *him*. Their liberation came not in being freed from having to work but in being freed from working for the wrong master.

With the statement in v. 21, “I will harden his heart so that he will not let the people go,” God introduced a new detail into the assignment, that of his own divine causation of Pharaoh’s stubbornness, but not a new expectation. He had already warned Moses that Pharaoh would be highly resistant (3:19–20). The reader might at first blush think that God was here announcing to Moses that he was going to frustrate Moses’ efforts. In fact, it was just the opposite. By indicating that he would control Pharaoh’s resistance to the exodus, God assured Moses that he was totally in control of Pharaoh in every way, able to make him resist as long as necessary even during a buildup of increasingly painful plagues and then make him give up and let the Israelites go at the moment of God’s choosing (which was already the essential message of 3:19–20).

Verses 24-26

This unusual story has engendered many different interpretations and attempts at explanation. The following assertions are important for understanding such a seemingly enigmatic story, which contains many events and assumptions that tend to be foreign to modern Western ears:

a. Whether one follows the MT Hebrew of v. 24 (“Yahweh met up with him and sought to kill him”) or the likely original LXX/Tg. of v. 24 (“The Angel of the Lord met up with him and sought to kill him”), the same essential point is made: God was not going to allow someone (Gershom—not Moses: the text of 4:24–26 never mentions Moses!) to get to Egypt alive without a decisive change in their circumcision status. The fact that this story follows immediately the warning of Yahweh about the potential death of Pharaoh’s firstborn son provides a spatial setting in the text: we now read a story about the potential death of Moses’ firstborn son, upon whose fate the focus of the pericope should naturally fall. The NIV, in inserting the name Moses at two points in the story via brackets, merely misleads the reader into thinking that Moses, not Gershom, was the subject of what Zipporah said and did.

b. Zipporah, who had grown up in the household of a Midianite (high?) priest, surely understood how circumcision was done and what its significance was—including the proper words to say in connection with a circumcision ceremony. Many people groups in the ancient

world practiced circumcision, including the Midianites; it was hardly unknown outside of Israelite circles.

c. The Egyptians practiced a partial circumcision, involving cutting only a small amount of the foreskin, a practice considered so illegitimate by the Israelites that it could be called “the reproach of Egypt” (Josh 5:9). If Moses had followed this sort of approach in circumcising Gershom, thinking that it fulfilled Yahweh’s expectations, he would have been quite mistaken and still would have been in defiance of Yahweh’s will, even if he himself had been fully and properly circumcised prior to his marriage to Zipporah.

d. Moses probably had undergone this partial Egyptian circumcision either upon his adoption by Pharaoh’s daughter or perhaps later in life. His biological parents may have avoided having him circumcised at birth for fear it would identify him as an Israelite and/or make him cry more and thus be detected by Egyptians seeking to kill the infant boys at that time (1:22–2:2), if indeed circumcision was even consistently practiced among the Israelites in Egypt in those days. This may have predisposed him not to circumcise Gershom, whom he was bringing along—uncircumcised—on the trip.

e. The expression “relative of blood,” or more naturally, “blood relative” (*ḥăṭan dāmîm*) found in both vv. 25 and 26, is key to understanding what Zipporah was thinking and doing: she was not necessarily using language about Moses as her husband (which would be expressed by the word *’iš*) or necessarily language she or someone else might have used at the time of their marriage, long prior to this event, when he was still (or still about to become) her bridegroom (which can be but is not the only meaning of *ḥăṭan*). It may well be that the language she used here is the sort that she would naturally have used about any male relative, since *ḥăṭan* simply means “relative.” Among the Midianites full circumcision was presumably practiced early in a male child’s life, although it is possible that some men probably were circumcised a few weeks prior to marriage rather than earlier in life. Zipporah said what she understood to be the proper language—which was her best attempt and apparently was a sufficient attempt—to show that the circumcision she performed was official and pious. When she said “you are a blood relative to me” (our translation), she presumably was speaking to Gershom, not to Moses.

f. The flint knife probably was the proper, traditional instrument for performing a circumcision (cf. Josh 5:2–9).

g. Zipporah touched the foreskin of Gershom to Gershom’s *genitals* from which it had just been removed. “Feet” (*rĕgālîm*) is one of several Hebrew euphemisms for “genitals” (cf. Isa 6:2; 7:20; Ezek 16:25; Deut 28:57; others include “hand,” “knee,” “stones” [see comments on 1:16]). She thus had physically circumcised Gershom; then immediately she symbolically used the removed foreskin to touch Gershom’s genitals and said the “right words” (the ones she understood to be godly and proper at a circumcision) in an effort perhaps to legitimize the previously neglected and now emergency circumcision. (Again, it was not Moses God sought to kill, nor was Moses likely to have been the person whose genitals were touched by the foreskin. An actual circumcision of Moses would have prevented his traveling for a number of days. Since from this point on in the narrative neither Zipporah nor Moses’ sons are mentioned until their reuniting in 18:2–6, it is likely that they did not travel farther than this camping place (*mālōn*, v. 24) and, after Gershom had healed, returned to Midian.

h. The expression “relative of blood” is not negative but positive, an endearing reference to a husband’s and wife’s joining to become one flesh/blood and thus producing offspring that are their own flesh and blood so that Gershom was clearly Zipporah’s “blood relative.” Quite possibly Zipporah, in saying this, was not merely repeating words Midianites said at circumcisions but was using these words to link herself closely to Gershom; so her act on his behalf would suffice instead of Moses’ actually doing Gershom’s circumcision.¹²⁴

Accordingly, v. 26 is perhaps best translated, “The Lord let him [Gershom] alone since she said ‘blood relative’ in connection with the circumcision.”

i. Moses may have failed God in two ways: he had not himself been fully circumcised according to the expectations implicit in Gen 17:10–14 until such time as his marriage to Zipporah, but far more importantly, he had not circumcised or at least not adequately circumcised one of his sons, likewise in violation of those expectations—both very serious sins of omission.

j. The consequence of failure to be circumcised is “to be cut off” from the holy people (Gen 17:14). This is just what God threatened to make happen in Gershom’s case according to v. 24. Fortunately, Zipporah saved her son from such a fate by saying and doing the right thing, as best she knew how.

k. The fact that Zipporah had time to do the right thing and remove the danger shows that somehow she was warned and given time to act. The specifics of that warning are not provided in the narrative, but the grace of God is implied clearly in the fact that by acting, Zipporah prevented a serious consequence. Thereby, the result was that Moses’ family was consistent with the practices God required of his covenant people, and thus the story ends happily with the will of God accomplished, even if by threat, and the blessing of God retained by Moses and his family.

l.

For all its laconic style and seemingly dramatic mood, this story is actually fully consistent with other evidence for Moses’ tendency to resist the call of God to such a daunting assignment as delivering the Israelites from Egypt against Pharaoh’s wishes, a tendency that began in 4:13 with his attempt to refuse the call. Even as he headed toward Egypt, he still did not have all aspects of his life (in this case his family life) in order. This is therefore one of several stories Moses told about himself in the Pentateuch that demonstrate his less than perfect obedience to God’s commands at various times (cf. esp. Deut 32:51–52).

By way of summarizing our view of the pericope: Exod 4:24–26 is a story showing how Zipporah, by performing as officially as she could a circumcision on her son—whom his father had failed so far to conform to the covenant requirements of Gen 17:10–14—saved him from the punishment required by the Abrahamic covenant of circumcision. Nothing can thwart God’s plan of redemption. Since Moses had not yet done his part in regard to Gershom’s circumcision, God accepted Zipporah’s decisive and pious actions in circumcising her son as an appropriate substitute so that God’s chosen, yet reluctant and headstrong, prophet could continue his assignment to lead the Israelites out of bondage. God often relents if people repent. Right words and actions, if they show the true intent of the heart, demonstrate right repentance. Moses might have lost his own firstborn son, just as Pharaoh would later lose his (predicted immediately prior to the present passage, in 4:23). Zipporah’s intervention prevented that from happening.

Verses 29-31

Moses was an outsider, but Aaron was probably an Israelite elder. This is probably why God gave him a role and why his role is so much more prominent initially. He gradually becomes less to the fore as Moses becomes known.

The Israelites probably had very limited knowledge of Yahweh prior to this, certainly they didn’t know his name or that they were to be his chosen people.

Chapter 5

Here the encounters with Pharaoh begin. Three key themes of those encounters are included already in these verses (5:1–14): the demand made by Yahweh, and quoted prophetically by Moses and Aaron, that “my people” be allowed to leave Egypt to worship “me” in the wilderness (vv. 1, 3); Pharaoh’s resistance, showing no sufficient fear of Yahweh (vv. 2, 4); and Pharaoh’s stubbornness, shown in either doing nothing or doing the opposite of what Yahweh demanded (vv. 4–14, in this case resulting in even harsher conditions for the Israelites). These themes, represented in various explicit and implicit ways, and with varying degrees of emphasis, persist through chap. 11.

Pharaoh doesn’t give up his stubborn resistance until the 10th and last plague is unleashed. Until that time the Israelites actually suffer more severe oppression as a result of Yahweh’s demands on their behalf.

Here the contest isn’t between Moses and Pharaoh, it’s between Yahweh and Egypt’s gods (for whom Pharaoh was a human representative).

Verse 1

Probably people had a right of audience with Pharaoh; this was common in the ancient world. Similarly Israel’s prophets later had the right of audience with the king.

Verse 2

The idea of Pharaoh not knowing Yahweh is a theme that continues throughout the plague accounts. First of all he didn’t know the name Yahweh and later when he did know the name he didn’t know who Yahweh really was, he didn’t (yet) take him seriously.

Verses 3-5

Moses says Hebrews rather than Israelites in line with the common practice of identifying them as foreigners. The statement about plagues and sword shows that they are deadly serious about Yahweh and his power – although ironically it would be the Egyptians and not the Israelites who would be struck by Yahweh. Sword here is shorthand for death or defeat in battle. Plague and sword summarise the curses of God against his enemies.

Verses 6-9

The remedy proposed by Pharaoh was predictable: if work was the way to *keep* the Israelites quiet and obedient (a method that had worked well for decades), more work was the way to *restore* quiet and obedience. According to 1:14, the forced labor burden on the Israelites was related mainly to brick making (“brick and mortar and with all kinds of work in the fields”). Presumably the “work in the fields” was not originally focused on gathering the straw for the bricks but on planting, tending, and harvesting crops. The Egyptians must have used some other group for the straw. Now, ratcheting up the workload, Pharaoh ordered the Israelites to gather their own straw.

Pharaoh doesn’t call God Yahweh and it’s not accidental. Rather, this omission subtly and efficiently conveys the impression of Pharaoh’s disdain for Yahweh—who was to him in effect merely “the god these people worship.” To him, Yahweh’s words were not valid; they were just *lies*. This is ever the view of the nonbeliever: God’s words are *lies* that keep you from conforming to the expectations of the world you live in and from enjoying life on your own terms (a concept that began early in human history, according to Gen 3:4).

Verses 10-14

The Israelites had believed in the Lord, and Moses and Aaron had faithfully spoken his word to Pharaoh, but things got worse rather than better. Surely this relatively detailed account of the increased workload and the suffering it engendered makes a principal point: God's people must not assume that carrying out his commands will increase their own comfort. Of course, Moses had been forewarned that Pharaoh would be resistant (3:19; 4:21), but the severity and breadth of the suffering his resistance would cause the Israelites was not explicitly stated; it is likely that Moses, Aaron, the Israelite foremen, and the Israelites in general were caught unprepared for a punitive workload increase.

The fact that the Israelites under the new rules simply could not meet their brick quotas is not surprising: Pharaoh had made the task virtually impossible. When the foremen, even under the penalty of being beaten, could not get the people to produce any more bricks (vv. 13–14), the situation was obviously intolerable. It is not surprising that an anguished appeal to Pharaoh for relief followed (vv. 15–16), even though such an appeal was essentially an act of desperation, presumably having little chance of success.

Verses 15-21

This section of the story contains several repetitions of information already known from prior verses in the chapter. The repeated material reinforces the severity of the problem confronting the Israelites. Its special emphasis lies in its focus on the rejection of the appeal and the hopelessness of the Israelites: when Pharaoh said, “ ‘You will not be given any straw, yet you must produce your full quota of bricks,’ the Israelite foremen realized they were in trouble” (vv. 18–19).

Thus the situation had transformed from one of hopefulness and faith (4:31) to resentment and doubt. Why? Because of Pharaoh's intransigence. He clearly is portrayed here as unyielding, determined to put the Israelites in their place, suggesting that the Israelites were going to need something much stronger than words to convince him to change his mind. As v. 20 indicates, Moses and Aaron did not attempt to return to the royal court to handle this appeal, suggesting that they saw no hope in it or realized that they would not have been welcome. The Israelite foremen go instead.

When the appeal of these foremen is rejected their anger turns on Moses and Aaron. Behind this rebuke appears to be the conviction that Moses and Aaron needed judgment because the nation's God, Yahweh, would not have let such a thing happen without his will having been thwarted by these leaders. The presumption that a good God never lets dangerous or harmful events happen to his people, false as it has always been, is a very old belief.

Verses 22-23

Moses prays to God – turned to the Lord is a better translation than returned.

By concluding his prayer with “you have not rescued your people at all,” Moses showed what he had actually been thinking: that God's promised deliverance would occur relatively quickly and would not involve setbacks or disappointments. From a literary point of view, Moses was telling this story on himself. That is, writing for the wilderness generation and beyond (see Introduction), Moses included a detail that shows how he himself was unreasonably impatient for God's deliverance. The wilderness generation—and all that had succeeded it—had a similar tendency, and what Moses eventually learned, all believers have had to learn for themselves: God's timing only sometimes coincides with our expectations,

and his idea of the hardships we need to go through only sometimes coincides with our idea of how much we can take.

Chapter 6

Verse 1

in this verse, God answered Moses' complaint not by addressing its component parts each in turn or by explaining why he had chosen to allow things to be so difficult for Moses and the Israelites. Rather, he answered by reference back to his original promise in 3:19 that it would take something greater than human power to move Pharaoh to let the Israelites go. The NIV translation "because of my mighty hand" is grammatically inexplicable; no pronoun appears in the Hebrew in either place the expression occurs in the verse. The language is an idiom connoting "by force," and the NIV routinely translates it in other contexts (though not consistently so) as "by a mighty hand" rather than "because of my mighty hand." God here promised Moses that he would force Pharaoh to let the Israelites go—not just for a three-day festival but he would "drive them out of his country." What God was planning for and reassuring Moses about was nothing less than the full exodus.

Verses 2-5

God's reassurance to Moses continues with covenant language, reminding him that he is Yahweh (v. 2), the God of the patriarchs, that the patriarchs worshiped him by that name, and that the patriarchal promises included their descendants' possession of Canaan. To possess Canaan required leaving Egypt, and therefore the patriarchal covenant was always, implicitly, also an exodus promise. This is the first time in Exodus that God says "I am Yahweh" (NIV "I am the LORD"). He had said these words (*'ānī'yahweh*) only twice before, in Gen 15:7 to Abraham and in Gen 28:13 to Jacob, each time in connection with the promise of the land to their descendants. Again here the promise of the land follows.

God is saying he's the *El Shaddai* of the Patriarchal stories. Thus Moses should assume full continuity between the promises to the patriarchs and the need for confidence in the present difficulties. Those promises held central the eventual gift of the land to the descendants of Abraham after their being enslaved in a foreign land and mistreated but liberated and enriched in the process—in other words, the whole exodus story in a very compact form:

Then the LORD said to him, "Know for certain that your descendants will be strangers in a country not their own, and they will be enslaved and mistreated four hundred years. But I will punish the nation they serve as slaves, and afterward they will come out with great possessions. You, however, will go to your fathers in peace and be buried at a good old age. In the fourth generation your descendants will come back here, for the sin of the Amorites has not yet reached its full measure." (Gen 15:13–16).

What the patriarchs trusted would one day happen was now underway, and God encouraged Moses here to believe that fact.

Verses 6-8

God has reassured Moses, now he's telling Moses to reassure the Israelites. In fact what God says here expands on his reassurance to Moses.

Verse 7 contains a special declaration of divine covenantal election of Israel in the words “I will take you as my own people, and I will be your God.” Similar statements modeled on this one, often with somewhat varied wording but always with “my people” and “your God” as the key vocabulary, are found in later contexts referring to this covenant promise.

Here what God was saying was, in effect: “Trust me that I will bring you out from under the yoke of the Egyptians. What is the proof? I won’t give you any yet, but when you are out of Egypt and at the place where I will take you as my own people (which any reader understands to be Sinai since Moses wrote Exodus after Sinai), you will be able to look back on what has happened and see that I accomplished everything that I promised you.” Only at Sinai, with its occasion of full ratification of the covenant, would God fully *take* Israel as his own people. The process began here, however, with their assent in faith to the promise that he would do so *after* having rescued them from Egyptian bondage.

Verse 8 hearkens back to the repeated forward-looking formal assurances given by God to the patriarchs that he would bring their descendants back to Canaan (Gen 15:13–20; 24:7; 26:2–5; 28:15; 35:12; 48:4). The solemnity of the promises is signaled in the wording “I swore with uplifted hand,” an idiom for “I formally promised.” In saying “I will give it to you as a possession,” God indicated that he would not merely let the Israelites live in Canaan but would actually let them own Canaan. They had never owned land—thus making Abraham’s purchase of land to bury Sarah an exceptional event worthy of a special story in Genesis (Gen 23:3–20). But now they would have the land where the patriarchs resided as resident aliens given to them as a gift from God. Here was an incentive to follow Yahweh indeed!

Verses 9-12

Optimism is often dashed by suffering, especially ongoing suffering. Faith is often diminished by hardship because emotions play a powerful part in most human thinking, and thinking can become increasingly pessimistic when any sort of pain continues unabated. Accordingly, it is understandable that the Israelites would not listen (v. 9) to Moses’ latest message of divine reassurance, even though they had previously welcomed Yahweh’s words (4:29–31). Pharaoh’s strategy (5:7–9) had proved remarkably successful. The people were overcome by impatience for relief and by hard slavery (NIV “discouragement and cruel bondage”).

This presented an obvious tactical problem for Moses, which he voiced in v. 12. If the Israelites, who would be his natural allies and who stood to gain from the message he was speaking on God’s behalf, would not listen, how could he ever expect to meet success by carrying on with the task of demanding freedom from Pharaoh, who was his natural enemy in this situation and who stood to lose hugely from an Israelite exodus? Nevertheless, God assigned him to confront Pharaoh once again and demand Israel’s exodus (vv. 10–11).

The style is more direct now. Originally Moses was told to ask Pharaoh to let the Israelites go into the desert, now God’s saying let them leave Egypt.

In verse 12 Moses is trying to get out of his assignment again.

Verses 13-27

A genealogy. The list begins with Reuben, Jacob’s firstborn son. In verse 20 Amram Moses fathers mentioned – Amram married his aunt. Later this was prohibited (Leviticus 18:12).

Indeed marriage to any close relative was prohibited (Leviticus 18:6). The lineage of the lawgiver broke the law.

Verses 28-30

This is just a reminder of Moses' previous protest.

Chapter 7

Verses 1-2

God gets around Moses objection by saying that Aaron can be the spokesman.

Verses 3-5

Hardening of Pharaoh's heart reminds us what God said in chapter 4.

What is somewhat new in v. 3 is the intention of God to *multiply* his signs and wonders—an adumbration of the multiple plagues that will successively humiliate Egypt and her gods and increasingly demonstrate that Yahweh alone controls the supernatural world.

In verse 5 God had previously said the Israelites would come to know who he was, now he's saying the Egyptians will come to know who he is too.

Verses 6-7

The age for Moses fits with his dying at 120 (Deut 34:7) and with Aaron dying at 123 (Numbers 33:39)

So we're now beginning the account of the 10 plagues (actually they're never called that in the Bible) – although it's not too misleading if we understand it properly. The usual Hebrew word used is *'ot*, a word meaning 'miraculous sign'. What Moses wrote is actually an account of eleven miraculous signs – and of course the last (the death of the firstborn of the Egyptians) was a massive sign of God's sovereignty and judgement.

Plague 7 (hail), 8 (locusts) and 9 (darkness) were nothing to do with illness or plague. God's work was complete when the Egypt as the superpower of the day was humbled and its power broken as the Egyptian army was wiped out.

The plagues build in intensity. The early ones (blood, frogs, biting insects) were brief in duration and less severe in that they did not cause death.

Plagues four, five, and six (swarming insects, animal disease, and skins sores) were much more harmful. The fifth killed off many livestock, and the sixth brought serious disease upon humans. Even so, these plagues were not enough to result in Pharaoh's relenting from his resistance to Israelite demands for freedom.

The seventh, eighth, and ninth plagues (hail, locusts, and darkness) were even more severe since the seventh plague resulted in the destruction of both animals and certain crops, the locusts ruined what crops remained, and the darkness plague was so frightening and debilitating during its three-day duration that Pharaoh was actually willing—at first—to allow all Israelites to depart if only they would leave their animals behind as surety of their eventual return (10:24).

Although the plagues built in intensity, it wasn't a steady increase, there were leaps – especially to the 10th plague which actually caused Pharaoh to surrender and launched the Exodus.

It cannot be accidental that God used ten plagues to teach the Egyptians that he is sovereign and that their gods were of no account. At the time of the exodus, both the Israelites and the Egyptians used a decimal counting system, which meant that the number ten tended to connote a full, complete, sufficient quantity of anything being explicitly enumerated. A run-through of the whole decimal list from one to ten provided more than enough demonstration of God's power over Egypt for anyone to get the message.

According to Hort all the plagues could have had natural causes:

Plague	Cause	Effect
Plague 1 (Nile becomes blood)	Unusually heavy rainfall in the upper Nile headwaters (Blue Nile sources)	The flooding dissolves and brings red dirt characteristic of the Abyssinian and Ethiopian plateau at the headwaters of the Blue Nile all the way into lower Egypt. Added to the reddish color of the dirt is the reddish color of certain microorganisms known as flagellates, which are always present in the Nile but because of the flooding and the nutrients brought with it and which multiply in abundance, making the Nile red in color, undrinkable, and poison to the fish.
Plague 2 (frogs leave Nile and go into houses)	Polluted Nile and rotting fish which in turn breed bacillus anthracis (anthrax)	Frogs leave the uninhabitable Nile and invade homes, but then die off suddenly because they are killed by the anthrax.
Plague 3 (mosquitoes, not the usually postulated gnats or lice)	Perfect breeding conditions in pooled stagnant water along Nile as floodwaters recede	Huge swarms of mosquitoes biting humans and animals
Plague 4 (flies, particularly the stomoxis calcitrans, carrier of anthrax)	Perfect breeding conditions in pooled stagnant water along Nile as floodwaters recede	Ingestion during grazing by animals, and biting of humans, causing plagues 5 (cattle anthrax) and 6 (human skin anthrax).
Plague 5 (animal death)	Anthrax from ingestion of grasses growing out of soil where frogs had died and where the bacilli anthracis spores were left in the soil. (Later, anthrax was cleansed from the soil by spring rain squalls.)	Nonstabled cattle (those allowed to graze "in the field") die.

Plague 6 (human skin sores)	Skin anthrax from bite of stomoxys calcitrans fly, which had picked up the spores from feeding on dead frogs	Severe skin sores, but no fatalities, as is characteristic generally of cutaneous anthrax
Plague 7 (hail and thunderstorms)	Extreme weather conditions not unknown for the time of year	Destruction of flax and barley, but not wheat and spelt, which were not yet up
Plague 8 (locusts)	Ideal breeding conditions from previously mentioned heavy rains and resultant wet grounds	Destruction of wheat and spelt and all other crops
Plague 9 (palpable darkness)	Extreme desert sandstorm from the south	“Darkness that can be felt” (10:21)

This could be true. Perhaps God initiated the plagues as natural phenomena under his control – but the final plague of the death of the firstborn is clearly completely supernatural.

Anyway, Hort’s theory doesn’t really hang together well.

Bush cogently summarizes the weaknesses of Hort’s thesis as follows: The biblical account describes the plagues as the result of commands given by Moses and Aaron and as commencing instantaneously by a gesture rather than coming gradually with the seasons (e.g., the Nile turned to blood “in the presence of Pharaoh” according to 7:20, and ashes thrown into the air “before Pharaoh” produced skin sores according to 9:10). The extremity of the plagues goes beyond what mere flooding of the Nile, no matter how unprecedented, would justify (e.g., the frogs “covered the land” according to 8:6; the very dust of the ground turns into biting insects according to 8:17). Moreover, since the Egyptian magicians could and did duplicate the phenomena of the first two plagues of blood and frogs, they obviously were reacting to what they and Pharaoh perceived as “magic” on the part of Moses and Aaron—not some gradually occurring environmental phenomenon already well known to them as natives of Egypt. In other words, if native Egyptian magicians could tell that the plagues were not natural phenomena, why should moderns, a millennium and a half later, try to overrule the opinion of observers on site at the time?

To Bush’s summary of weaknesses in Hort’s approach one might add that the magicians saw the third, irreproducible plague as “the finger of God” (8:19) rather than as something that normally happens in Egypt, even if on a lesser scale. Moreover, their ability to duplicate the plagues failed completely thereafter, and they gave up trying to duplicate what obviously was something beyond their experience. Additionally, Pharaoh’s reactions to each plague suggest genuine surprise and dismay—hardly likely if the plagues were merely normal environmental phenomena experienced to a severe degree. Further, the plagues differentially affected the Egyptians but left the Israelites unscathed, so that “natural “phenomena were respecting political-ethnic boundaries, something hardly explained by recourse to the outworkings of mere natural processes. Perhaps most significantly, the final plague, that of the death of the firstborn, has no natural explanation at all. It was a special judgment of God (how could any natural disease strike only firstborn children and not harm others?) and is so obviously so that because of it Pharaoh insisted on the exodus of the Israelites in sudden and direct contrast to the determined prior policy not to let them go.

The view that best takes account of all the data may be summarized as follows: The first nine plagues were special, divinely produced manifestations of God’s sovereignty over Egypt—its king, its people, its environment, and its gods—accomplished by imitations on a huge and

destructive scale of phenomena thought by the Egyptians to be the province of their gods. God turned things believed to be the specialty of “the gods of Egypt” against the Egyptians, and showed himself in control of all events and powers they would have attributed to the objects of their faith. The tenth plague, on the other hand, was in no way a magnified imitation of a natural phenomenon but stood apart from the first nine as a decisive imposition of the death penalty on the nation that tried to enslave and mortally oppress God’s special people, his “firstborn son.”

Ten Plagues against Egyptian Gods [chart]

1. Water turned to blood	Khnum Guardian of source of river Hapi spirit of the Nile
2. Frogs	Hapi frog goddess to Egypt Heqt fertility goddess
3. Lice	Seb the earth god of Egypt
4. Flies	Uatchit the fly god of Egypt
5. Disease on cattle	Ptah, Mnevis, Hathor, Amon All gods associated with bulls or cows
6. Boils	Sekhmet Egyptian goddess of epidemics Serapis, Imhotep Egyptian gods of healing
7. Hail	Nut Egyptian sky goddess Isis & Seth Egyptian agricultural deities Shu Egyptian god of the atmosphere
8. Locusts	Serapia Egyptian protector from locusts
9. Darkness	Re, Amon Re, Aten, Atem, Horus All Egyptian gods of the sun

The 10th plague was against Egypt and all its gods generally.

Verses 8-13

It’s interesting that Aaron enacts the miracle that Moses had been given to perform before Pharaoh (4:5) and it’s also one of the signs that Moses had been told would demonstrate God’s power to Pharaoh (4:21). But the staff to snake miracle can be replicated by Pharaoh’s magicians – all of them (“each one” v12). Were Moses and Aaron just magicians then?

First, Moses and Aaron were not magicians. What God did through them was genuine—turning a piece of wood into an animal. The Egyptians, on the other hand, *were* magicians, and the simplest reading of the text is one that assumes they *imitated* by magical deception what Aaron had done by divine power. For a Pharaoh eager not to be persuaded to believe in a foreigner’s God, their ability to produce snakes from staffs (perhaps using boxes and curtains, in the usual manner of magicians doing substitution tricks) would be enough to allow him to follow his predilections and doubt Moses and Aaron—and thus disregard their God. Second, the text states that the magicians accomplished their imitation “by their secret arts” (“trickery,” v. 11) rather than by any sort of supernatural means or with the help of Satan or any other similar nonworldly mechanism. Third, the end of v. 12 states that Aaron’s staff swallowed theirs, a performance they could not and apparently did not even try to duplicate. They were at that point trumped because a substitution trick is nothing compared to causing one snake to eat a group of other snakes. Clearly, the power of the God of Moses and Aaron was vastly superior to their ability. Fourth, it was God’s purpose to start small. This preplague

miraculous portent was *intentionally* a simple, small-scale miracle to test the will of Pharaoh and to show Moses and Aaron what they were up against. It was one thing to use these sorts of miracles to convince the Israelites (4:31); it was very much another to use them to convince Pharaoh. Egypt's king, as predicted (3:19; 4:21), was not going to be so easy to impress, and that fact was clearly part of the divine plan. Impressed though the Egyptian magicians themselves may actually have been once Aaron's rod ate theirs, Pharaoh, his mind made stubborn by God, now had an excuse for resisting, even if a lame one; he could for the time being content himself with the comforting belief that what Aaron had done was just a magic trick.

Verses 14-24

Now we come to the first of the real plagues (as opposed to signs) and the citizens of Egypt (as opposed to just Pharaoh) begin to be affected.

V14 -15

God is finding out how Pharaoh reacted, he's explaining to Moses that Moses mustn't be surprised.

V15 Plagues 1, 4 and 7 each begin with an outdoor confrontation with Pharaoh. In 2, 5 and 8 the confrontation is in the court and there is no confrontation in 3, 6 and 9. Here the confrontation on the banks of the Nile is clearly appropriate. The Nile was especially important to Egypt and loss of power over it should have been compelling.

If Pharaoh was going to bathe in the Nile then this plague had an immediate effect on him by thwarting his intentions.

Verse 16-18.

Moses represented Yahweh and now a plague punishment is warranted because Pharaoh has not listened. "By this you will know that I am the LORD" (v. 17) is very important to this message. Previously the announcement "I am the LORD" had been spoken to the patriarchs (Gen 15:7; 28:13), to Moses (6:2, 29), and to the Israelites (6:6-8); but this is the first time it is to be spoken to a non-Israelite. In effect, it was part of the very early announcement of the gospel to the Gentiles since, as we have already noted, it was not a mere statement of identification but a declaration of the application of saving power. Here it is used in a manner consistent with its usage in the prediction earlier in 7:5 ("And the Egyptians will know that I am the LORD when I stretch out my hand against Egypt and bring the Israelites out of it") and, even more importantly, with its usage in the central locus of explanation for the plagues ("I will bring judgment on all the gods of Egypt. I am the LORD," Exod 12:12).

Verses 19-21

So the plague comes. Six considerations should be kept in mind in the analysis of this plague: (1) "Blood" is a color in Hebrew as well as a substance, just as in English, and no firm data exist for the interpreter to differentiate in this story between the possibility that the Nile and other surface water turned to actual blood from the possibility that the waters turned—for whatever reason—"blood" in color. (2) No special theological overtone is present relative to the "blood" here; it is not a foreshadowing of "the blood of Christ that flows" or any such thing. (3) The important punishment element in the plague is neither the substance nor the color but the pollution of the water, rendering it not merely undrinkable for humans but deadly to fish. (4) Yahweh's implied control over "Nile" (the

Nile river god) could hardly have been missed by any thoughtful Egyptian considering the meaning of this plague. (5) Aaron's staff was not merely a simple visual device but a symbolic reminder that God, not Aaron or Moses, was actually performing the miracle of the plague. (6) The plague may well have imitated a natural phenomenon by which some parts of the Nile sometimes turned reddish, but it does not appear to have been merely a natural phenomenon in light of the immediacy of the result and its extent.

The extension of the plague to buckets and jars (a) shows it wasn't completely natural and (b) shows how comprehensive it was.

Verse 25 shows the plague lasted only 7 days. If we take the usual view that the plagues increased in intensity from first to last then the 'blood' couldn't have been real blood otherwise this first plague would have been completely life threatening.

I think the statement in verses 22-24 that the Egyptian magicians were able to duplicate the effects means only that they could do it on a small scale with small quantities of water. Clearly they couldn't affect the whole Nile, it was already affected.

The Egyptian people, however, had to scramble to get water, which was available only from new wells. Subsurface water had not been affected; the miracle of the first plague was limited in its lethality to fish—people were merely greatly inconvenienced. Nevertheless, the superiority of Israel's God to the god of the Nile was obvious. Verse 24 provides a postscript similar to that which accompanied the account of the staff-to-snake miracle (cf. 7:12), the purpose of which was to clarify that what the magicians could do was limited. In the case of the staff-to-snake miracle, they could imitate one aspect of the miracle, but they could not duplicate the action of the superior snake. In the case of the water-to-blood plague, they could imitate the changing of clear water to red water, but they could not reverse the curse, so the general population suffered. What Moses and Aaron had done was no trick; anyone desperately digging a well to get pure water knew that.

Chapter 8

Verses 7:25 – 8:1-4

A week after the first plague Moses is told to go to Pharaoh's palace. We don't know if this new second plague of frogs is related to the first. Moses is just producing a summary account for future generations of Israelites – the really important thing is the 10th plague and the Passover. Yahweh gives the same demand to Pharaoh, except he's now dropped all the three days politeness. The word translated worship means 'serve' so Yahweh is saying that his people will cease to serve their old master (Pharaoh) and serve their new master Yahweh.

Here Yahweh gives a warning "If you refuse to let them go ..." . From now on most of the plagues have warnings. The first plague probably didn't affect Pharaoh too much personally, because his servants would have brought clean water from wells they had dug, but now frogs would invade his palace and his bed.

Verses 5-7

Moses carries out Yahweh's command and the Egyptian magicians are again able to some extent to replicate this.

Verses 8-11

Pharaoh is allowed to set the time of the removal of the frogs. Giving the Egyptian king this power of timing is from a human point of view apologetically brilliant on God's part: if the king could say when the frogs would go away, he would *personally* know that the timing was not due to the simple consequences of natural processes or a fiat of the gods of the Egyptians but the sovereignty of the God of Israel. Theologically, therefore, this plague was the point by which Pharaoh should have been able to admit that there was a true, powerful God behind the demands voiced by Moses. His refusal to believe even then is a paradigm for all people who, though confronted with the reasonableness of biblical truth, nevertheless refuse to believe by reason of factors other than the believability of the evidence.

In v. 8 it is already evident that Pharaoh placed little stock in the apparent ability of the magicians to replicate the production of frogs on a small scale since getting rid of them, rather than producing more of them, was what Pharaoh was driven to seek. His request to Moses to "pray to the LORD to take the frogs away from me and my people" implies as well that he by now knew that Yahweh existed and could control parts of nature the Egyptians previously thought were the sole province of their own gods. What Pharaoh was offering in return was still, of course, merely the chance to "offer sacrifices to the LORD," a privilege far short of what he by now also surely understood was the Israelite demand: full freedom from Egypt.

Prayer for one's enemies is thus not a concept initiated in the New Testament but is in fact first encountered in the Old Testament. The wording of the final part of v. 9 ("except for those that remain in the Nile") is ambiguous as to whether there were frogs in the Nile that never came out onto the land in the first place or whether some frogs would return to the Nile as the rest died. Here the NIV translation differs from the NIV of v. 11, even though both verses end identically in the Hebrew. A clearer translation might end the prior sentence with "your officials and your people" and then make the final words of the verse a new clause or sentence (e.g., "they will remain only in the Nile," as in v. 11). Although it is an unlikely scenario in the context, according to the grammar of the Hebrew one could reach the conclusion that there had been frogs all along up to this point in the Nile and thus infer that the reddening of the Nile that killed the fish did not kill the frogs as well. Far more likely is the scenario that some frogs returned to the Nile after the frog plague ended.

Verses 12-15

These verses describe the power of prayer, when a faithful servant of the one true God prays in accordance with his Master's will. Moses might have had good reason to assume that the frogs would eventually go away on their own, but he had certainly not been notified by God that they would die off on the day Pharaoh specified. Accordingly, he prayed earnestly for a result that from his point of view, at least, was not guaranteed but in faith that the Lord would do what he asked if his prayer were proper. It was, and the frogs died off suddenly enough that they could be gathered in heaps to decompose and smell, as v. 14 indicates. According to God's already announced plan, this plague was not what would cause Pharaoh to release the Israelites. It would in fact meet with no success in light of God's making Pharaoh stubborn (7:3-5; 4:21-23), so v. 15 reminds the reader, in effect, that "there's much more to come before God is finished with Egypt and its king."

Verses 16-19

Now we have another plague, that of gnats – probably more correctly winged biting insects. Now the magicians can't duplicate the effect.

What happened, then, was that the magicians confessed publicly that this plague (and by implication the others so far) was not a trick but a miracle. The expression “this is the finger of God,” in light of its usage in Exod 31:18 and Deut 9:10, would seem to mean something like “a supernatural act of God” rather than literally referring to God's hand or figuratively conveying a sense such as “something easy enough for him to do with just a finger.” The magicians were not confessing to their own conversion to true faith; they were simply saying that the plague was divine in origin, not human.

Verses 20-32

Now comes the plague of flies. Again this begins with an outdoor morning confrontation with Pharaoh and again there is a warning to Pharaoh. Now there starts to be a differentiation between the Egyptians and the Israelites – “the houses of the Egyptians will be full of flies ...” This is stated in some but not all of the subsequent plague accounts, perhaps this is just to avoid repetition, I think the implication is that there is a differentiation in all of them.

After this fourth plague official resistance cracks a bit, but Pharaoh eventually reneges on his promise to let the Israelites go into the desert.

Verse 20

As Moses meets Pharaoh, Pharaoh is probably thinking oh no not again.

Verses 22-23

What Yahweh will do to the Egyptians he won't do to his own people.

Verse 24

There would have been no glass windows or window screens.

Verse 25

Pharaoh begins to weaken – but he's only allowing the Israelites a holiday to worship in Egypt – far short of what they're asking for.

Verses 26-27

Moses won't settle for what Pharaoh is offering. What he says is true, Israelite animal sacrifices were detestable to the Egyptians and so it made little sense to do what they hated in their midst.

Verse 28

Pharaoh caves in, but only for a short limited exit.

Verse 29

Moses accepts, but tells Pharaoh that he must keep his bargain.

Verses 30-32

So Moses gets the flies to leave Pharaoh, but Pharaoh reneges on his agreement. The scene is being set for Pharaoh as someone who can't be trusted.

Chapter 9

Verses 1-4

This is a short account of the fifth plague – a plague on livestock. This account begins similarly to plagues two and eight, with Moses being sent to Pharaoh indoors, presumably at his court, with both a demand and a warning, “Let my people go, so that they may worship me. If you refuse to let them go, ...” In this account v. 2 adds “and continue to hold them back,” a wording that is not found in the other plague accounts but might have been included in almost any of them; it has the effect of reminding Pharaoh—and the reader—that there was an impetus to the Israelite cause that Pharaoh was restraining. He was *holding back* people who belonged somewhere else.

Part of the evidence leading to the conclusion that the plagues increased in severity as they progressed is found in the words of v. 3, “The hand of the LORD will bring a terrible plague.” None of the prior plagues was announced by Moses as the work of “the hand of the LORD.” It is, of course, the case that the Egyptian magicians used a similar expression in the third plague account to explain to Pharaoh that the plague of biting insects was supernatural in origin (“This is the finger of God,” 8:19), but now God himself announced a plague as coming directly from himself, implicitly referring to its severity. He had, of course, caused all the others; but now he warned Pharaoh that he would make this one happen, in effect, in a big way. The NIV “will bring a terrible plague” is a finessed conceptual rendering of the Hebrew, but it captures some of the sense of the final three words in the original, which may literally be translated “a very severe plague.”

Verse 4 not only emphasizes once again the differentiation between the Egyptians and the Israelites with regard to the destructive effects of the plague but announces death for the first time. It was not yet the death of people, but it was far greater than, say, the dying off of the frogs mentioned in the second plague story (8:13–14). Domesticated animals were treasured as enormously valuable assets in Bible times (as in any time prior to the industrial revolution, or any place even today where farming predominates). Moreover, they were seen as closely interrelated to the welfare of humans, a fact reflected even in the Bible’s creation accounts. The pantheistic Egyptians revered all animals but birds and livestock more than fish and amphibians. For them to have lost livestock would constitute a serious blow indeed. For them to have lost livestock while the Israelites retained all theirs represented a nationwide humiliation.

Verses 5 and 6

God’s verbally setting a time for a localized event (not merely a plague) to happen has no parallel elsewhere in Scripture, and the mention here of the expression “the LORD set a time” presumably is included as a contrast with the wording in the second plague account (7:25–8:15), where Moses specifically allowed Pharaoh to set the time (“I leave to you the honor of setting the time,” 8:9).

The plague stories are a unit the above helps to show that. “The land” refers to Egypt, again highlighting the supernatural nature of the plague, since a naturally occurring plague would not limit itself by political boundaries. Verse 6 describes the actuation of what had been warned and predicted previously. God fulfilled his word and the timing he had announced, and the Egyptian livestock died, with Israelite livestock being untouched. The verse also contains a translation choice in the NIV that creates a possible misimpression for the reader. The NIV translation “all the livestock of the Egyptians died” would seem to suggest that no Egyptian livestock survived the plague, especially when this statement is followed by the

(correctly translated) statement “but not one animal belonging to the Israelites died.” Yet when one reads on to the account of the seventh plague, it is clear that there were plenty of Egyptian livestock still alive, since they are mentioned as being in danger of being killed by the next plague, that of ferocious hail (9:19–21). Moreover, Egyptian livestock are described as alive at the advent of the account of the final plague, that of the death of the firstborn (12:29). This apparent contradiction is not due to inconsistency among the plague accounts, multiple contradictory sources for them, or any similar cause. It is due simply to the fact that the Hebrew word *kol*, usually translated “all,” can mean “all sorts of” or “from all over” or “all over the place.” In this verse the better translation of the full expression would be “all sorts of Egyptian livestock died” or “Egyptian livestock died all over the place.”

Verse 7

Even though Pharaoh could clearly see the supernatural nature of the plague he still wouldn't let the Israelites go.

Verses 8-12

The sixth plague, the plague of boils. We don't know how or why Pharaoh was present, the text doesn't say.

Some have said that anthrax caused the 5th and 6th plagues – but why would the effects have been limited to the Egyptians. I think this is just a wish to reduce the supernatural to the natural. Second, the fifth and sixth plagues do not fit a key criterion for natural epidemics or disasters because they do not develop naturally, that is, gradually and inconsistently from person to person or animal to animal. They come about virtually instantaneously and uniformly, according to timing that is not controlled by nature but overtly by God. One reason for specifically granting Pharaoh the choice of time for ending the plague of frogs (8:9) was surely so that those who followed the plague stories closely would be reminded of their supernatural origin and conclusion. Third, as the biblical text itself makes clear (12:12), the plagues were not mere natural developments but were *supernatural developments related to the natural sphere*—purposeful evidences of divine control over the natural world of Egypt designed to show the one true God's superiority over the natural world as it was (pantheistically) conceived by the Egyptians. In other words, the plagues *imitated* nature in certain ways as a means of showing God's control over nature (and its “gods”)—ways that can make it easy for a reader mistakenly to think that the plagues were *merely* natural. Fourth, with regard specifically to the sixth plague, the cause of the disease does not appear to be consistent with its type. Fine particles or airborne dust normally would be associated more with a dust storm (in extreme form a “sand storm”) than with anthrax, and contact with airborne particulates would be likely to cause the inhaled form of the disease at least as frequently if not more commonly than the skin form, producing death in great numbers rather than simply festering sores. Finally, it is not entirely clear that the fifth and sixth plagues were a single disease, whatever the type. Many things can cause cattle to die; many things can give animals and humans skin lesions. The most convincing, contextually based understanding of the fifth and sixth plagues, in fact, is that they were somewhat epidemic-like supernatural events intended to humiliate the gods of Egypt, the Egyptians in general, and Pharaoh in particular and show the objective observer that there was only one God in whom faith should be placed.

Verse 8-9

This plague is brought about by a transformation of one substance into another, as was the case with the initial signs God gave Moses as proof of his being a true prophet. Two of the three were the transformation of his staff into a snake and the transformation of his healthy hand into a diseased one (4:1–8), and one served also as the first plague (the transformation of water into “blood”; 4:9; 7:14–24). The transformation in this case involved filling his cupped hands full of soot from a furnace and throwing it skyward in the sight of Pharaoh.

What started as a small amount of soot was changed and vastly multiplied by divine fiat into a huge amount of fine dust, covering Egypt and causing festering boils on both humans and animals.

Verses 10-12

Pharaoh remained unyielding.

Verses 13-35

The seventh plague the plague of hail. Is hail worse than anthrax (or whatever the previous plagues were)? Yes, it was so severe that it killed unprotected humans and animals. Of course, it is also easy to tell when hail stopped falling—and once the hail ceased, Pharaoh sinned yet further by again refusing to do what he had promised to do during the hailstorm. Israel remained confined to Egypt.

Verses 13-19

The announcement of the plague. the wording of the command, “This is what the LORD, the God of the Hebrews, says: Let my people go, so that they may worship me,” represents the relatively full form of the way the command in the various plague accounts is given: Yahweh is identified, his people are identified, the call for release is made, and its purpose is described. Those who had been forced to serve (*‘abad*) Pharaoh must now be allowed to worship/serve (*‘abad*) Yahweh.

Much of verses 14-16 is new though, it’s an explanation of the entire set of plagues. God is saying that Pharaoh must learn that Yahweh is the only supreme God. That’s why God kept hardening Pharaoh’s heart so that he and the Egyptians would have a clear demonstration of this.

The expression employed in v. 18, “from the day it was founded till now,” is apparently a Hebrew reflex of a common Egyptian expression usually translated “since/from the founding of Egypt.” The Egyptians were enormously proud of their long history as a nation and thought of all other peoples as newcomers, johnny-come-latelys—automatically inferior to themselves, whom they viewed as the original and central civilization of the earth. Accordingly, when God spoke through Moses here about the severity of the coming plague, using an expression well known and commonly used by the Egyptians (and certainly well known to Moses) that would have meant to the average Egyptian something like “since the beginning of time,” he was powerfully emphasizing what a terrible plague it would indeed be.

In verse 19 God is testing the Egyptians, if they obey his command the effects of the plague will be greatly ameliorated. Those who would die would be those who failed to hear the warning; thus the biblical principle that people’s *choices* do them harm—not merely what they cannot control.

Verse 20-21

The wording “those officials of Pharaoh who feared the word of the LORD” is carefully composed. Had Moses written “those officials of Pharaoh who feared the LORD ...,” he would have indicated that Egyptian court officials had actually converted to faith in Yahweh. Instead, he used the hapax legomenon *yārē’ et-dābār* (“fear the word of”) because of the uniqueness of the situation, that is, belief short of conversion, people’s belief in something they had been told but not saving faith in the one who revealed it to them. It was, however, a

belief sufficient to cause some Egyptians to act immediately, based on their experience of the sudden onset of prior plagues.

These verses seem to indicate that Pharaoh, however reluctantly or disdainfully, had actually carried out God's command given to him in v. 19 to warn the people of the impending danger. If he himself did not believe it would amount to anything, he may still have acceded to the pleas of some of his officials (those who did believe God's warning, presumably) to allow *them* to spread the word of what was about to happen. He may even have gladly promulgated the order to bring cattle indoors, a difficult and complicated thing for many people to do, on the theory that it would simply arouse greater resentment against Israel, something he could use to his advantage, and would make the Israelites look foolish if the hailstorm were simply that—a typical hailstorm. It is hard to imagine that many Egyptians were not saying something like: "Hail? We've seen plenty of hailstorms. So what? They never last long."

Verses 22-26

Describe the plague and its devastation. Moses holding his staff in the air again signals the start of the plague. The plague wrought its devastation on humans, animals, and crops "all over Egypt" (vv. 22, 25) except in "the land of Goshen," which once again escaped from the terrors being unleashed on the rest of Egypt. The hail, part of a massive nationwide thunderstorm, was accompanied by extensive lightning and large quantities of wind and rain that also could and would have caused extensive damage in their own right. Note that 9:23 emphasizes that even though Moses made the motions, it was God who sent the plague ("the LORD sent ..."). This was a killer storm, with huge hailstones destined to do damage of all sorts, including destroying humans, animals, and crops.

Verse 24

Confirms what God had predicted, this is the worst hailstorm in the history of Egypt. Since Egypt became a nation sometime around 3200 BC and these events took around 1250 BC, it could be said that the storm was the worst in almost two thousand years.

Verse 25-26

Delineates the damage and in the usual order of relative worth: humans first, then animals, then plants. Nothing alive in the open could have remained undamaged. Humans and animals were killed, at least in large numbers, anything growing in fields was beaten down. Although trees might have lost smaller branches but survived alive, their fruit would have been knocked off (thus "stripped every tree") and smashed on the ground under the force of the falling hailstones. Again, as v. 26 states, Goshen was spared, as is stated in several of the prior plague accounts and by extrapolation may be assumed to have been the case in all of the instances of prior plagues.

There is nothing in this account that does not comport with what is known scientifically about the lethal power of a severe hailstorm. Fatal hailstorms occur often around the world still today. The largest tend to occur in northeast India (in 1888 two hundred and forty people were killed and hundreds more injured by hail in Moradabad), but hundreds of destructive hailstorms occur every year and in virtually all parts of the globe. For example, a single hailstorm killed or injured four hundred people in Germany in 1984, and a storm in China's Henan province killed twenty-two people and injured two hundred on July 22, 2002. In modern times hailstones as large as one kilogram have been measured. Hail falls at more than fifty meters per second, and hailstorms can devastate entire crop fields in just minutes. Hail

damage is often an aspect of tornado complexes, and thus it cannot be ruled out that there was a degree of tornado activity present in the storm described in this account.

Verse 27-28

Pharaoh *apparently* repents (at least a bit) and agrees to let the Israelites go. At first sight this certainly seems to be the closest Pharaoh had so far come to expressing belief in Yahweh's power and the closest he had come to any sort of repentance, accompanied by a concession that had the ring of finality to it, as if he really had surrendered to Yahweh's will ("I will let you go; you don't have to stay any longer"). If so, why did Moses remain so skeptical, as indicated by his words in v. 30? Part of the answer is to be found in the range of meaning of the Hebrew *ḥāṭā'ū* (NIV and most Eng. versions: "I have sinned"). The root *ḥṭ'* has a semantic field that includes "to miss" or "to err" (Judg 20:16; Prov 8:35–36; 19:2; Job 5:24) as well as "to offend" someone of close relationship (e.g., Gen 4:22; 50:17), or "to rebel" against a superior (Gen 40:1; 1 Sam 24:11; 26:21; 2 Kgs 18:14), or "to abuse/mistreat" (1 Sam 19:4). Indeed, with regard to the closest usage of the root to the present context, the NRSV translates *ḥṭ'* as "be unjust" in Exod 5:16 ("you are unjust to your own people"). In other words, a translation such as "I have acted unjustly" or "I have been unfair" would be equally possible in Exod 9:27 for what Pharaoh said in Egyptian to Moses, who rendered it accurately in Hebrew but whose rendering is somewhat misleadingly represented in English by "I have sinned." That is, nothing in what Pharaoh said need lead us to believe that he actually was sorry for his sins and seeking forgiveness from the God of Israel. Rather, he was, at most, admitting to being wrong for having treated the Israelites as he had—and doing so temporarily under the pressure of the worst, most damaging plague he and the Egyptians had yet encountered.

Pharaoh's words in v. 28 represent a further concession beyond what he had already said when reeling from the effects of the plague of flies. Even if implicitly he was still hoping or assuming the Israelites would not permanently leave Egypt but would be gone only temporarily to offer sacrifices in the wilderness, he did not qualify his words here to any such effect. It is possible to read his remarks as virtually allowing the exodus to begin. "We have had enough" is tantamount to saying "we can't stand it any more." The point of his request "pray to the LORD" is, however, not significantly different from that of the similar request in 8:28. What Pharaoh wanted was for the horrible hailstorm to stop—nothing more. He was not asking for a closer relationship to the true God or for any other blessing per se.

Verses 29-30

Moses agrees to pray to stop the plague. Moses had previously followed a pattern of praying for the end of a plague only after he had gone out from the presence of Pharaoh (frogs, 8:12; flies, 8:29–30). This time he indicated that he would pray only after he had gone "out of the city," a phrase repeated in v. 33.

The phrase doesn't seem to connote "away from pagan influence" or any such thing. So why would Moses use it twice? The answer would appear to be that by going out of the city into the open (the "field") to pray while the unprecedented hailstorm continued unabated during his journey, Moses showed his complete trust that the hail could not harm him. He not only could travel through the hail but could stand and pray for the end to the hail in the very location—exposed, out of doors—that was otherwise fatal to people and animals; he could go into the area of danger and remain unharmed. His action of going "out of the city" was, in other words, a further demonstration of Yahweh's differentiation between the Israelites and

the Egyptians, a theme of this and several other plague accounts overtly and implicitly a theme of all of them.

Moses is saying he'll reach heavenwards with his hands – he'll pray to the one true God Yahweh.

The fear of the Lord is enjoined throughout Scripture, demanding that God's people stand always in awe of him, appreciate his supremacy and greatness, fear the consequences of disobeying his will, and not treat lightly any aspect of their covenant relationship with him, lest the consequences be severe or even fatal. Attempts on the part of some in modern times to define fearing the Lord as merely respecting him distort the biblical evidence.

Verses 31-32

Describes the damage to the crops. In Egypt flax and barley were harvested in February–March, a fact that provides a clear time-of-year date for this part of the story at least. Wheat and spelt, however, were harvested in March–April, a full month later, that is, at the time of the tenth plague and exodus itself; they were too small at this time to be permanently damaged by the hailstorm. Though the wheat and spelt shoots were up and growing, and surely were smashed down by the hail, they were able to recover and continue to grow fairly normally. This does not mean that the Egyptians were spared disaster because in God's plan the locusts were on the way to dispose of the last remaining hope (via the plague immediately following, 10:1–20), so that even those Egyptians who may have said, “Well, at least we can eat wheat and spelt and make it through until next year” were quite mistaken.

Also with regard to timing: since the time of year of the exodus is known, it becomes evident that there could not have been more than a month or so of time between this plague and the tenth and final plague. This overall time frame comports well with the “benchmark” one-week duration of the first plague (7:25) and the general reckoning that the plagues took place over the duration of a few months within a single year, perhaps from winter to early spring.

Verses 33-35

Describe the removal of the plague followed by Pharaoh reneging on his promise.

This conclusion to the seventh plague account resumes the theme of Pharaoh's “sin” that had been introduced by Pharaoh himself in v. 27. As already argued in connection with v. 27, this “sin,” referring to Pharaoh's willful intent to disobey what he knew to be the will of God, can also be understood as “doing the wrong thing”; and the second clause in v. 34 could be translated “he did the wrong thing again.” Moses, on the other hand, did exactly what he said he would do, and God responded faithfully to Moses' prayer (v. 33); the plague came to an abrupt halt—not merely the hail but the entire storm, including “the rain and hail and thunder” (v. 34). Both Pharaoh, however, and his officials resumed their stubborn stance against any compromise with the Israelites (vv. 34–35a). All had happened “just as the LORD had said through Moses.” The “sinful” tendency that had first motivated Egypt to enslave Israel (1:9–14) was being used by God to subjugate not Israel now but Egypt.

It's clear that Pharaoh and his advisors were simply not in control of their own destinies but were being forced to repeat stupid actions to their own disadvantage as punishments. The wise course of action for them would have been to let the Israelites leave and prevent further divine destruction of their land and possessions. But they were no longer able to take wise courses of action; their inclinations and intellectual capacities were subject to frustration by

the only wise God, who was making fools out of them. As he ratcheted up the severity of the plagues, he kept them from responding accordingly. Using their pride, their willfulness, their cultural assumptions, their emotional tendencies, and any and all other characteristics under his control, he simply made them do what would be to their disadvantage: he made them resist yet further.

Chapter 14

Verses 1-2

Apparently the Israelites originally went East/Southeast, but now they change direction to the Northeast and the coast of the Red Sea where the Israelites are ordered to encamp for the third time. None of the locations can be exactly identified – they were probably small out of the way places and most ancient texts only mention large populous places.

Currid suggests that Pi-Hahiroth could be a term that derives not from Egyptian but from Akkadian, a Hebraized form of the Akkadian *pi-hiriti*, which means “the mouth/opening of the canal.” This canal could have been the one that stretched from the Mediterranean to the area of the Great Bitter Lakes and perhaps even farther south, a defensive canal designed to inhibit an enemy’s crossing into Egypt without great difficulty. But of course, such a canal would have had at least one major break or opening as a means of allowing traffic (controlled and guarded of course) to enter and exit Egypt for trade, military surveillance. In Currid’s view this opening, over which the Israelites may have crossed, would have been located “near the Gulf of Suez.”

The exact places aren’t really important anyway.

The route the Israelites are taking speaks of confusion, but it’s God’s means of trapping Pharaoh one last time.

Verses 3-4

The theme of God’s superiority to Pharaoh, seen repeatedly previously, continues here. But how could Pharaoh be expected to conclude that the Israelites were suddenly unable to leave Egypt²⁶ after he had just been so severely taught the power of Israel’s God in the ten plagues? What would give him the sense that suddenly he could gain victory over the Israelites when their God had just shown total superiority to him and his gods? The answer requires appreciating Egyptian religion in its ancient Near Eastern context. To all the ancients (except those Israelites who were beginning to understand the only true God) the gods and goddesses that controlled the world were arbitrary and capricious, quick to change their actions and attitudes, constantly vying with one another for power, not omnipresent but manifesting themselves at given locations and then leaving those locations unpredictably. James could say of Satan, “Resist the devil, and he will flee from you” (James 4:7) because Satan, who is finite and cannot be in all places at once, will soon lose interest in trying to tempt someone who resists him and will move on to someone else more likely to yield to temptation. Likewise, the Egyptians’ gods were considered beings who might not always be present among their people. Accordingly, Yahweh knew that it would be natural for Pharaoh to think that he, Yahweh, after having expended great effort to demonstrate his power to the Egyptians, might now no longer be directly involved in helping the Israelites so that he, Pharaoh, could once again assert his power over them unhindered. Indeed, the Israelites themselves were not above assuming

at times pessimistically that they had been abandoned by Yahweh. Once again all of this was a plan of God announced in advance, so that Moses and the Israelites would not (if they could maintain their faith) be surprised and discomfited by the coming Egyptian pursuit. The purpose of the plan was to “gain glory over Pharaoh” as well as “all his army.” Previously the vaunted Egyptian army was not subject to the same sort of humiliation that Pharaoh, the Egyptians in general, their land, and their gods had endured. Now it was time in God’s plan to include the army in the scheme of humiliation. Because the Israelites were already organized as an army and needed to think of themselves in terms of their upcoming military role, it hardly should come as a surprise that God would want them to see his sovereignty in a military encounter as a means of encouraging them toward the military challenges that lay ahead for them. A military defeat of the Egyptians also would demonstrate final proof of God’s power to Egypt (“and the Egyptians will know that I am the LORD”).

Verses 5-6

Sure enough Pharaoh regrets what he’s done and decides to pursue the Israelites to re-enslave them. We don’t know how long it is since they left, the text doesn’t tell us, but if it was a few weeks it’s easy to imagine that Egyptian building projects were beginning to suffer. Verse 6 doesn’t actually mention “army” it should be rendered “so he got his chariot ready and took his people with him.”

Chariots were a formidable military weapon in those times on flat ground, but were not so useful in the Promised Land which was relatively mountainous – David never used them (although Solomon did). Chariots were also useless in swampy or wet ground – the wheels were narrow and they got bogged down.

Verse 7

Pharaoh took a lot of chariots – 600 were only the best of these.

Verses 8-9

Once again God hardened Pharaoh’s heart as he had done during the plagues.

Again, God’s purpose was to humiliate Pharaoh and the Egyptians, to expose the nonsense of their religion, and to show himself the only true God. Pharaoh put in motion a full chariot pursuit of the Israelites, who had been going out confidently (“marching out boldly”) so far, buoyed in spirit by the favor God had shown them during all the plagues and by the fear God had placed in the hearts of the Egyptians after the Passover. The Israelites were an army but one that traveled on foot with all dependents and possessions including cattle; the Egyptian army, on the other hand, was a professional military force able to move much faster with its horse-drawn chariots, so whatever time had elapsed between the Israelites’ Passover morning departure and the Egyptians’ decision to gather the chariot forces and pursue them, the Israelite lead had now been easily overcome.

Pharaoh had probably not taken foot soldiers with him in spite of the mention of troops in verse 9. Here the Hebrew word *hayil* really means a military force.

The Israelites have got their backs to the sea.

Verses 10-12

So the Israelites panic and complain.

The sight of hundreds—perhaps thousands—of approaching chariots apparently drove all memory of God’s assurances through Moses to the Israelites in 14:1–4 out of their minds. Those assurances were relatively generally worded, and it is possible that many or most Israelites had mistakenly regarded them as promises that Pharaoh’s pursuit would not reach them but fail en route. Accordingly, when they actually saw the Egyptian chariots coming at them and realized their helpless position (from a human point of view) as a poorly armed, untrained, unprepared army encamped with its back to the sea, they panicked. To their credit they at least “cried out to the LORD,” showing that they regarded him as the one to save them.

Verses 11–12 provide a summation of complaints spoken to Moses with the benefit of reconstructed hindsight—a classic instance of what is now called “recovered memory.” The Israelites and those who joined them had hardly been forced to depart from Egypt. They had been only too glad to accept freedom from their bondage. In light of the bitter reproach of the Israelite foremen when Pharaoh had increased their workload as a result of Moses’ demands (5:19–21), it is conceivable that some percentage of Israelites may have said at one time or another prior to the commencement of the plagues something like “Leave us alone; let us serve the Egyptians.” But that had not been what anyone had consistently said, nor was it the prevailing attitude at any time. Now they suddenly “recalled” those words and the “fact” that they had all along thought the exodus was a bad idea. Faced with what they believed to be their imminent death, they redefined their recent history. Their pessimism was ill-founded entirely. The Egyptians were interested in capturing them and returning them to slavery rather than killing them (14:5), so their claim that “it would have been better for us to serve the Egyptians” was actually only a statement of the very thing the Egyptians had in mind for them. So they were wrong on two counts: they thought the Egyptians were coming to kill them, and they did not believe that God would rescue them. This was the first of the post exodus declarations by Israelites that they should have stayed where they came from. The others (e.g., Numbers 14:1–4; Joshua 7:6–9) share considerably the theme of this one: when hardship is encountered, the miserable past suddenly looks like the good old days. The Israelites were simply thinking the way most people think of the past when the present seems unbearable.

Verses 13-14

Moses gives them confident reassurance.

In contrast to the majority of Israelites, Moses had understood the meaning of God’s earlier promise of protection (14:2–4)—and had not only understood it but believed it. This speech of Moses represents perhaps his finest hour yet in the leadership of Israel. He urged calm, commanded simple, patient waiting (but not total inaction; see below), reassured the people that what seemed to them a certainty that they would die in the wilderness (v. 12) was in fact the last, hopeless gasp of Egyptian hubris, and explained to them the most basic tenet of Old Testament holy war: God fights for his people and—no matter how undertrained, ill-equipped, poorly organized, or outclassed they might be—eliminated their foes.

From the point of view of God’s attributes, Moses’ speech alludes to five: (1) God is a dispeller of fear, a comforter of those who are afraid. (2) God is a deliverer from distress. (3) God invites and expects his people to trust in him (“Stand firm ... you need only to be still”). (4) God removes danger. (5) God is a warrior against the forces of evil. The timing and

application of these attributes are under God's control, not man's, but Moses could offer strong assurances to the Israelites in this instance because of what God had already said through him to them in regard to his plan to humiliate Egypt yet again, a last time.

A better translation of vv. 13–14 would be: “Don't be afraid. Stay where you are and see the LORD's salvation, which he will provide for you today. Because you have seen the Egyptians today, you will never see them again. The LORD will fight for you. You do not need to do anything.”

What Moses was saying was, in effect: “You should be glad you are seeing the Egyptian army coming at you. Because you have seen the Egyptians, it means that God's prediction that he will trick them and trap them is about to be fulfilled. If you *didn't* see them, now *that* would be cause for worry because then God's prediction to us would *not* be coming true.”

Verses 15-31

Tell of the parting of the Red Sea and the drowning of the Egyptians. This is the last story in the book involving direct contact with the Egyptians, and it provides one final and grand occasion for God to “gain glory through Pharaoh and all his army” (v. 17).

In many ways this is the moment of supreme demonstration of the power of God displayed for the benefit of those who place their faith in him. So significant is the event that Moses was inspired to follow his prose narrative account with a poetic one, that is, the hymn he wrote about the event (15:1–18). Thus the story is told twice—once in prose and once in poetry. The prose account, here, tells the story chronologically and with many of the usual sorts of details and descriptions. The poetic account is a hymn, a song of praise that not only looks back on the event but asserts future implications: if God could do this sort of thing to the Egyptians, he could certainly be trusted to bring to completion his whole plan to allow Israel to conquer and settle into the promised land and to reign over his people forever and ever.

Verses 15-18

The Israelites had assumed they were hopelessly trapped with their backs to the sea, but God has other ideas. His plan of deliverance for Israel and destruction for the Egyptian army involved something easy for the Creator of all things and all minds to imagine and execute—the parting of a body of water by wind (v. 21)—yet something previously outside of the realm of experience and therefore outside the realm of concept for either the Egyptians or Israelites.

God isn't rebuking Moses in verse 15, he's rebuking the Israelites because Moses is the intermediary.

In saying “Tell the Israelites to move on,” God was asking for a breaking of camp, rounding up of animals, packing of belongings, an orderly departure by ranks. All this would take many hours, and, indeed, the remainder of that day and almost the entire evening were used in the process of getting the Israelites out of their encampment and into and across the sea (vv. 19–22).

In verse 16, the staff of God again plays an important role in the miracle, symbolizing God's power and presence and reminding them that this was God at work and not Moses.

Again as well, the language of stretching out the hand refers to using the staff. As the staff had affected the Nile in first plague, turning water to blood (esp. 7:17–20), and in the second, producing frogs from the Nile (8:1–15), now it would affect an even greater body of water, the Red Sea, causing it to divide. With God’s words in this verse Moses and the Israelites learned how it was that they could escape the Egyptians: they would take the direction they had assumed was the most impossible, away from the Egyptians, right into the ocean.

Since nothing is impossible with God (Matt 19:26; Luke 1:37), what they had not been able to imagine as a direction in which to flee was now their escape route. God’s promise to them did not merely offer an inconvenient but doable route of escape (as would be the case if they would have to float, wade, or slosh their way out of danger) but would allow them actually to walk on dry ground—ground so dry that even chariot officers were willing to send their horses and chariots on it in pursuit of Israel. That sort of entirely dry path would make taking families, children, and animals along relatively easy and would also create a temptation for chariots, which would otherwise not be driven voluntarily into any sort of wet terrain.

No sensible chariot commander would order chariots to go into a wet area. Later, in the days of the Judges, Canaanite charioteers found this out to their dismay. It was the mud in the Kishon River flood plain after a heavy rain that bogged down the chariot army of Sisera so that the Israelites under Deborah’s general Barak could defeat them (Judges 4:1–16) and even forced Sisera to abandon his own chariot (Judges 4:15, 17). God had in that situation also lured chariots to their destruction (Judges 4:7). They tried to fight near a rain-swollen river and lost. Why, then, did the Egyptians follow the Israelites into the midst of the Red Sea, knowing full well that water and chariots don’t mix? The answer is, similarly, that God lured them into it—made them stubborn enough to do it (“I will harden the hearts of the Egyptians so that they will go in after them,” v. 17).

God had doomed the Egyptians from the beginning.

Verses 19-20

God protects the Israelites all night.

Verse 19 would better be translated: “Then the angel of God, who was traveling in front of Israel’s army, moved and went behind them, so the pillar of cloud moved from in front of them and stood behind them.” In other words, the angel of God and the pillar were the same thing: God’s manifestation of himself in the visible presence of the Israelites.

The pillar isn’t merely a guide it’s a protector, it holds back the Egyptians whilst the Israelites finish breaking camp and make ready to go.

Verse 21

Moses stretches out his hand with the staff of God in it and the sea is divided by a special east wind sent by God. It’s a bit like the special east wind that brought the plague of locusts (10:13).

An east wind is often seen as destructive or punishing, partly because east winds in Egypt, the Sinai, and Palestine are so often blisteringly dry and hot. It is to be expected that some skeptics have argued that the mention of the east wind is the only fully

historical element here—a wind that temporarily dried up some sort of small, normally marshy, and/or muddy area so that the Israelites could walk on it relatively easily and feel that if any Egyptians were to follow them (something that did not actually occur in the skeptical reconstruction) they would be harder to catch. The text, however, says that the wind actually pushed one part of the sea away from the other part (“drove the sea back ... the waters were divided,” v. 21) and created a “wall of water on their right and on their left.”

The term used for “wall” here, *hōmāh*, connotes a very large wall—not a small stone wall or retaining wall but always a massively large (usually a city) wall, towering above the Israelites, who marched on dry land with walls of water on either side of them.

It is clear from the descriptions given that the sea through which the Israelites walked was deep water, not something shallow. A city-wall sized wall of water on either side of them implies the division of a deep body of water, not merely the drying out of a shallow one or the drying out of wet terrain. Even the use of the term *yam* (“sea”) here implies the depth of the water. *Yam* is never used for swamps or mud flats but is used consistently to describe large bodies of water (what we would call either lakes or oceans).

Verses 23-25

Four difficulties thwarted the Egyptian army’s attempt to capture the Israelites: they pursued into the sea, they suffered from God’s direct debilitation of their minds, they had trouble with chariot wheels (possibly a synecdoche for any number of chariot failures), and they suffered a sense of defeatism.

From the wording of vv. 23–24 we can assume that the entire Israelite contingent had either crossed through the sea onto dry land or were almost finished doing so by the time the pillar of cloud stopped being a barrier to the Egyptians. The Egyptians may have thought they had been stymied by a severe weather front, or fog, or an unusually cloudy night and felt that with the coming of dawn (“during the last watch of the night”; lit., “during the morning watch,” i.e., the time when the night ends and morning arrives) things had obviously changed in their favor. Thus they did what was foolish—they drove chariots into the ocean.

Verses 26-28

God drowns the Egyptian army. Again this is accomplished through the staff of God.

At daybreak (so the Israelites could see God’s work clearly) the waters flowed back and drowned the Egyptians. Presumably God caused the strong east wind to cease.

Verse 27 is a bad translation in the NIV. The correct translation is, “As the Egyptians were fleeing from it, the LORD shook the Egyptians off [more colloquially, dumped over the Egyptians] in the midst of the sea.”

Most ancients couldn’t swim – so none of the Egyptians survived.

Verse 29

Is just a recapitulation, it doesn’t mean that the Israelites were still crossing when the Egyptians drowned. Verses 29-31 are a summary of what happened.

Chapter 15

Verses 1-18

Are a victory hymn composed by Moses – who may have written it immediately after the events described. That would probably make it the earliest authored part of Exodus.

The song must have become instantly popular, judging from Miriam's decision (see comments on vv. 20–21) to teach it to the Israelite women. One can imagine groups of Israelites singing the song often on their way to Mount Sinai and during the wilderness wanderings after leaving Sinai as a new, replacement generation learned some of their history through music. So important did the song become to all generations of believers that it is described in John's great apocalyptic vision as a song to be sung even in heaven (Rev 15:3).

Verses 19-21

A prose summation and Miriam's reprise of the hymn.

Verse 19 points up my earlier argument that only chariots and not foot soldiers were involved in pursuing the Israelites. That clearly made sense as they wanted to catch up with them quickly.

Verses 20 and 21 are the first and only mention of Miriam in Exodus. It is likely that she was the older sister who kept watch over Moses when he was in his special little ark and had the presence of mind to secure his own mother to nurse him for Pharaoh's daughter (2:4–8), there can be no absolute certainty of that identification. She is called here "Miriam the prophetess, Aaron's sister," a description that begs the question, Why not call her Moses' sister? The answer would appear to be that Moses used proper modesty in introducing her officially and culturally correctly here, linking her to the oldest living male in her family, Aaron, who was three years older than Moses and thus the proper person to be mentioned. For Miriam to be called a prophetess may mean that she had already distinguished herself in the faithful expression of God's verbal will to some group within, if not all of, the Israelites, unless it refers back from the point of Moses' writing Exodus specifically to Miriam's present function, that of conveying the word of God through song. Several other godly women bear this same title "prophetess" in the Old Testament (or its Greek equivalent in the NT): Deborah (Judges 4:4), Huldah (2 Kings 22:14), Isaiah's wife (Isaiah 8:3), and Anna (Luke 2:36); a couple of not-so-godly women do as well (Noadiah in Nehemiah 6:14 and "Jezebel" in Revelations 2:20).

Micah confirms Miriam's leadership role in the exodus (Micah 6:4), which, on the analogy of how Moses and Aaron exercised their leadership and how prophets in general do so, would have meant that she received instructive words from God to relay to the people as a way of guiding them.

Verses 22-27

The grumbling begins. After the first great victory came the first big test. The Israelites did not pass it easily. When circumstances seemed threatening, they quickly forgot the significance of the deliverances they had recently experienced (ten plagues and the drowning of the Egyptians at the sea) and complained. God used the occasion of their complaining to test them and teach them about trusting him enough to obey him and thus enjoy his benefits. They failed to learn.

Once across the Red Sea, the Israelites went to Shur. This is a vast, rugged, and sparsely populated wilderness region in the northern Sinai, stretching from what in modern times is the eastern side of the Suez Canal to the Negev of Israel. It was past the boundary fortifications the Egyptians had built to protect Egypt proper and thus represented freedom from the likelihood of any further Egyptian pursuit. One of the demands the Israelites had all along sought from the Egyptians, to go “into the wilderness,” was now a reality. Much remained, however, before the second part of their demand, to serve Yahweh, would be accomplished. They then traveled “for three days ... without finding water.” Presumably they were heading south, toward Sinai, along one of the ancient caravan routes that offered reasonable passage on foot for caravaneers who brought ample water supplies with them but that certainly was not laid out to get a large host of people to the nearest watering place.

From a human point of view, it is entirely understandable that the Israelites would have begun to worry about water by the third day without finding any. They and their animals probably had consumed nearly all the water they had carried with them in skins, and it is not inconceivable that as they approached Marah in expectation of being able to drink all they wanted, many of them drank their last water and/or gave it to the animals. Accordingly, finding foul water at Marah was not merely a disappointment but a cause of panic. “Bitter” water (*mārāh* means “bitter” in Hb.) is often clear so that it looks potable but in fact contains large percentages of dissolved mineral salts that render it undrinkable.

Their question, “What are we to drink?” was not in itself outrageous or even unfair. Their sin manifested itself rather in their *attitude*, which is suggested in the statement at the beginning of v. 24, “So the people grumbled against Moses.” Moses was, of course, God’s human representative among them and a likely target for blame. What is noteworthy, however, is that the people were following the pillar of cloud and therefore knew perfectly well that it was Yahweh who had led them to this location. But since Moses was the Lord’s spokesman, they expected the answer to their complaint to come from him. The people did not have what they had expected and failed to trust God to provide it. Since the Garden of Eden that has been a formula for disobedience.

God nevertheless does a miraculous thing for them – he makes the water drinkable.

Marah was a place to drink but not to encamp. The Israelites actually camped further on, at Elim, which is described as having abundant water (“twelve springs”) and being wooded (“seventy palm trees”). The location of Elim is, like so many other places mentioned in Moses’ ancient narrative, uncertain; but assuming the people continued traveling southward toward Mount Sinai, a reasonable conjecture would be to associate the spot with the Wadi Gharandel, a riverbed in Shur that has plenty of water and trees in certain places. Any groundwater source other than a dug well may be called a “spring” (*‘ayin*), so the twelve springs mentioned here may have been twelve separate “water holes” available for drinking and drawing water and watering herds at that time of year—even if all twelve holes were fed by one main source when the Israelites found the place over three thousand years ago. The number of trees may have been exactly seventy then, but the same number could hardly be expected all these years later. Accordingly, the identification of the spot cannot be made on the basis of a precise count of “springs” and trees in modern times.

Chapter 16

Verse 1

According to Num 33:10–11, part of the passage where Moses provided his most systematic review of the exodus and wilderness itinerary, the Israelites camped along the shore of the Red Sea between the time they left Elim and the time they entered the wilderness [NIV “desert”] of Sin. On their journey southward they were thus staying close to the east coast of the Red Sea and probably following rather consistently the old road that ran southward along the eastern side of the Red Sea that the Egyptians had used for mining commerce.

Verses 2-3

Again grumbling took place, and Moses noted that “the whole community” took part, suggesting that the problem of not enough food to eat had been building steadily rather than having come about suddenly and that everyone was affected to some degree, perhaps most of them seriously. From time to time Moses reminded the reader that both he and Aaron were involved in many of the exodus incidents, and his inclusion of Aaron (“grumbled against Moses and Aaron”) here overtly highlights that fact.

The Israelites are speaking metaphorically, they didn’t really want to die in Egypt and they don’t want to die now, but want something done to feed them.

They claimed that they had in Egypt “all the food” they wanted, which probably was an exaggeration, but not necessarily baseless. Nothing in the prior account of the Israelite suffering under Egyptian oppression suggested a lack of food. The “pots of meat” they sat around had been real, if not always a daily experience, since the Israelites, as small and large cattle farmers originally and right up through the time of the exodus, were routinely in a position to have meat to eat—perhaps considerably more than the average Egyptian.

Verses 4-5

God’s provision for the Israelites immediately addressed both their short-term and their long-term need for food. Knowing that they would be spending a long time in the wilderness, he had prepared for them not just a means of getting enough of the food they were used to but something far better: “bread from heaven.” Moreover, God was teaching them a concept: that he was their ultimate provider, the one who from heaven gave them not necessarily what they expected but what they really needed. Thus his satisfying them with the bread of heaven becomes a theme of Scripture that not only refers to the manna described in this account (cf. Psalms 105:40; Nehemiah 9:15) but to the ultimate provision of eternal sustenance, Christ himself (John 6:31–58).

This great gift also involved a test. The NIV translation of the end of v. 4 obscures the point of God’s statement. It should be translated “so that I can test them to see whether or not they will walk by my law.” In other words, the people’s willingness to obey the manna-gathering law (*tôrāh*) would show God whether or not they would be inclined to keep his covenant law (*tôrāh*) as revealed at Mount Sinai. It was not just a test to see if they could follow instructions but a test to see if their hearts were inclined to be his covenant people.

The test itself required faith for an agricultural people. Farmers know that if one harvests only enough food in a day to meet the needs of that day, eventually one has no food because no crops or animals produce food every day. Now they were being asked to restrain their natural tendency to gather as much as was available to gather in anticipation of the time when no gathering would be possible. God was teaching them to trust him every day afresh, and they were challenged to think about his provision in a way that had never before been part of their planning pattern.

Verse 5 looks backward to the creation account and also forward to the coming Sabbath ordinance – the fourth commandment.

Verses 6-8

Moses and Aaron are prophesying. Again we look back to the creation account with an evening morning pattern.

Verse 9

Moses continues speaking as a prophet through Aaron.

Moses required “the entire Israelite community to come before the LORD,” which suggests that all or virtually all the people had joined in the complaining about lack of food. To “come before the LORD” means to gather to whatever place or object represents Yahweh’s presence among them. At this point in their history, it was the pillar of cloud. They must go right up to it and thus show they were ready for a meeting with Yahweh directly, not just through his intermediaries, Moses and Aaron. “He has heard your grumbling” does not refer to God’s ability to perceive what the people were thinking and saying; in his omniscience he would always know that. It is, rather, an idiom for “paying attention to and planning to respond to” something.

Verses 10-36

God sends quail and manna.

God was testing his people throughout the exodus events: leading them in odd directions without fully explaining why (14:1–4), surprising them with potentially destructive enemy attacks even after they had left Egypt (14:10ff.; cf. 17:8ff.), requiring them to walk into and through deep ocean water (14:15ff.), and taking them to locations that lacked the necessities of life (as in 15:23ff. and 16:2ff.). All of these challenges were part of a plan to develop a people’s willingness to trust him. Explaining everything in advance would have run counter to that plan. It was necessary for Israel to learn faith while confused, while afraid, while desperate—not just in theory but under pressure of actual conditions where survival was uncertain and faith was tested to the limit.

The manna story represents yet another testing story: it is introduced as such (16:4) and features details that describe the way at least some Israelites failed the test at first (16:20, 27–30). Because the schedule for gathering the manna seemed counterintuitive to ancient agrarians, it provided a way of testing Israel to see if they would obey not only those commandments that made perfect sense to them but also those that did not. The same sort of challenge exists today. If people think God demands a behavior that runs against their intuitive sense of what is right, or pleasurable, or reasonable, or just “not so bad” (sex outside of marriage, e.g.), it is easy for them not to take a commandment seriously, which (although few realize it) is the same as not taking God seriously. This correspondence of not respecting commandments and not respecting God explains the severity of God’s reaction when his people do not do what he tells them to do (16:28).

The manna story – a daily miracle – became such an important part of the wilderness memory that God commanded them to preserve a piece of it in the Ark as one of its three sacred contents (33-34).

It is a shame that such a wonderful divine provision should have come about as a result of faithless grumbling on the part of the people. How much better it would have been had the Israelites prayed patiently and trustingly for God's answer to their lack of food a month into their exodus journey. Grumbling is hardly to be commended and is not in itself worthy of reward. God, however, still *heard* it and graciously responded—not in kind, that is, with a poor quality provision suitable for grumblers, but with a miraculous, tasty, nutritious, and sufficient food, exactly what he would have sent if they had prayed faithfully in the first place. His goodness to his people is not dependent on their willingness to respect him as they ought. This is not to say that respect for God's will is irrelevant to his rewards, only that his temporal, as opposed to eternal, rewards often do not correlate with our temporal behavior.

God appears to the Israelites even more impressively than in the pillar of cloud – he appears in the clouds (10). In this case the cloud may have displayed a sort of blinding fiery brilliance (as in 24:16–17) and/or a smoky opaqueness (as in 40:35) that from the point of view of visibility at least overwhelmed those who encountered it. The Israelites apparently had no trouble sensing that God was right among them in real power and substantial presence. We possibly should understand the verse to imply that God's glory caused them to turn and look at the cloud even though they had been facing Aaron because it was so impressive that they sensed it even with their backs turned.

The only mention of quail in the chapter comes in verse 13. It is brief and obviously of secondary importance to the manna because the quail represented a one-evening supply of meat, whereas the manna was to be a daily occurrence for forty years and the more important food supply for that entire generation of Israelites. In ancient times meat was cooked and eaten immediately upon slaughtering because there was virtually no means of preserving it after the animal from which it came was killed. The quail would have provided a well-appreciated single evening meal for the people, relieving them of their hunger; but the manna was to be something that was always available for them and a food that, by contrast to any meat, could actually keep for two days when necessary (16:5, 24) even though it normally melted away very fast if not collected (16:21).

Manna actually comes from the Hebrew for “what is it?” (*mān hū'*) and the name stuck. The omer they were to gather was about 2 quarts.

In spite of God's generous provision, not all the Israelites were obedient – some gathered more than they needed and tried to save it overnight – but it rotted (20).

The Israelites disobeyed God again and tried to gather manna on the Sabbath (27).

Verses 10-12

God appears awesomely in the clouds – presumably this was even more impressive than the pillar of cloud.

Verse 13

This is the only mention of quail in this chapter. As I've said it was a one off event, the principal food was to be manna. Meat couldn't be preserved in ancient times once the animal was killed.

Verse 14-15a

Once the dew evaporated, the Israelites saw something they hadn't seen before and weren't expecting to find. The description can be best translated as follows: "There on the surface of the wilderness was a thin, crisp substance, thin like frost on the ground." In other words, it may not have appeared in "flake" form at all but perhaps in sheets. It may have been "flaky" in the way a pie crust is called "flaky" but not necessarily occurring in the form of separate, individual flakes.

As we've already said the word manna comes from the Hebrew for what is it.

Verses 15b-16

The manna was God's provision, not something the Israelites could just harvest as they saw fit.

Verses 17-18

I don't think this is describing a miracle, I think it's just saying that the Israelites obeyed God's instructions. A better translation of the Hebrew is: "The Israelites did so. Some gathered more, some less. Since they measured it by the omer, the person who had gathered more had nothing left over, and the person who gathered less had no shortage; each had gathered according to what he could eat."

Verses 19-20

No the Israelites become disobedient. As we've said the command was completely against the instincts of an agricultural people. This reminds us of the "give us this day our daily bread" in the Lord's prayer.

Verses 21

You had to get up in the morning, God was disciplining them.

Verses 22-24

The exception for gathering what you needed each day was the Sabbath. On the Sabbath the manna that was kept overnight didn't rot.

Verses 27-28

Still some people were greedy and went out to look for more manna on the Sabbath, but they found none. This was the second disobedience and God expressed his anger through Moses.

Verses 29-30

God uses this disobedience to reinforce the Sabbath lesson.

Verses 31

Before sugar was produced honey or fruit compounds were the only real way of sweetening food. Honey was best, but it was rare (since bees were not cultivated) and a luxury.

Verses 32-34

At this stage the Israelites were simply commanded to preserve a sample of manna, later it would be given the very special recognition of being one of three items placed in the Ark of the Covenant.

Chapter 17

We start with more grumbling about water

Verses 1-2

They're not really going out from the wilderness of Sin, but continuing to go south within it. Rephedim was probably near to Mt Sinai, the modern Jebel Musa. So the Israelites are now close to Mt Sinai – “the one of Sin”. This was where God wanted them to be – once again a place with no drinkable water. This was another test of their faithfulness. It's just like chapter 16.

Verses 3-4

Still just like chapter 16. Moses didn't handle the protest very well, he should have reassured the people that God would provide. Stoning of verse 4 was the normal way of dealing with someone who threatened a whole community. Now Moses is showing a lack of faith in God.

Verse 5

God is ready to provide a solution. Verse 5 is more literally translated: “The LORD said to Moses, ‘Get out in front of the people. Take with you some of the elders of Israel, and take in your hand your rod with which you struck the Nile, and start walking.’” In other words, special emphasis is placed on Moses' getting “ahead of the people,” the position that either the divine pillar or the “Angel of the LORD” held under the usual conditions.

Verse 6

God's presence is essential for any miracle. Horeb is another name for Mt Sinai. The provision of water is a divine gift in many Biblical contexts. Jesus often spoke of the Holy Spirit as living water. God isn't just allowing the Israelites to find water he's making sure that they realize it's a divine provision.

Verse 7

In Hebrew, “Massah” means “testing/trial/temptation,” and “Meribah” means “protest/contention/quarrel/strife.” Only here is the location identified by both its names.

Doubting the Lord's presence amongst them was inexcusable, it was an insult after all that God had done.

Verse 8

Now the Amalekites attack. The enmity between them and the Israelites goes back to the Esau-Jacob rivalry – Amalek was a grandson of Esau.

Verses 9

Joshua appears in the Bible for the first time. The fact that Moses is planning to use the staff of God indicates the military superiority of the Amalekites. He was obviously much younger than Moses as he became his successor.

It's interesting that the Israelites had a day to prepare for battle. Either they had scouts out or the Amalekites arrived gradually. The Israelites arms had probably mostly been made on their journey (it's unlikely they were allowed weapons in Egypt) and were probably not of the best quality.

This is the first time Moses makes use of the staff of God without the text saying that he was told by God to do so. Probably by now he expects us to know that he won't use it without receiving word from God.

Verse 10

There are lots of hills in the area. Josephus says that Hur was the husband of Miriam.

Verse 11

This was a holy war and God correlates the fortunes of the army with the position of the staff. The Israelites need to realize that they can only win because God is fighting for them.

Verse 12-13

The staff had to be over Moses head emphasizing God's superiority and keeping it there ensures Israelite victory.

Verse 14

Here we see that God wanted Moses to preserve this history and points up the writing of the Torah by Moses.

Verse 15

Moses builds an altar to celebrate the victory. This was a common practice (Noah and Abraham and etc). Altars are for worshipping and worship involves expressing gratitude and blessing.

Verse 16

What Moses said, then, was "My hand was at/on [i.e., touching] Yahweh's throne," a way of saying, "When I held up that staff, I was symbolizing the presence of Yahweh right with us, sitting on his throne, [ruling over the battle and helping us to win]." The verse, and thus the account of the battle against Amalek, ends with a summary of what God had told Moses to relay to Joshua: "Yahweh has war with Amalek in every generation," or as the NIV more idiomatically puts it, "The LORD will be at war against the Amalekites from generation to generation."

Chapter 18

Verses 1-12. Visit and conversion of Jethro, Moses' father in law - very relevant for Christians because we all have family members we'd like to see come to faith. Jethro would have known where Horeb/Mt Sinai was because Moses used to take his sheep there.

Verse 1

The news of the dramatic departure of the Israelites from Egypt could hardly have been kept quiet, it would have been spread by travellers and that may be how Jethro heard.

Verses 2-4

Why was Moses reluctant to take Zipporah on the journey with him, maybe the marriage was going through hard times - verse 2-3 says she had been "sent away" so they could even have been divorced. Moses was after all married to a black Cushite woman (Numbers 12:1). The Hebrew word used here is not the usual word for divorce, so probably not divorced.

Verse 7

No further mention of Zipporah is made in the Bible. Could better be translated they asked each other how they had been.

Verses 9-11

Better translated, The Lord was delighted at all the good things the Lord had done for Israel.

Jethro had probably been sceptical of Moses call. Now Yahweh becomes the supreme God to Jethro.

Verse 12

Worshipping Yahweh and eating a covenant meal with other believers shows conversion.

Chapter 19

We're about to come to the giving of the Law in chapters 20-23 – but that mustn't cause us to skip over chapter 19.

Verse 1-2

Verse 1 may also be translated as follows: “Three months to the day after the Israelites had left the land of Egypt they entered the wilderness of Sinai.” The wilderness [NIV “Desert”] of Sinai was simply the wilderness area immediately around Mount Sinai, which in turn was within the much more vast Wilderness of Sin. The water supply might now have been nearer, because 17:1, 6 implies that the water supply for Rephidim was near Sinai. That would have been a blessing.

Verse 3

Moses went up Mount Sinai to listen to God's revelation

Verses 4-6

Israel is being called to covenant holiness. Verse 4 identifies the parties to the prospective covenant, Yahweh and Israel, and reminds the Israelites how they can be united with God.

Verses 5 and 6 tell us that although God is Creator and Father of all people and people groups, he announced here his intention to create for himself a particular people, a “treasured possession.” This represents the separation of his chosen people from the general world population, or, stated in terms of the overall biblical plan of redemption, the beginning of the outworking of his intention to bring close to himself a people that will join him for all eternity as adopted members of his family. Very strong monotheistic statement.

Israel's assignment from God involved intermediation. They were not to be a people unto themselves, enjoying their special relationship with God and paying no attention to the rest of the world. Rather, they were to represent him to the rest of the world and attempt to bring the rest of the world to him. In other words, the challenge to be “a kingdom of priests and a holy nation” represented the responsibility inherent in the original promise to Abraham in Gen 12:2-3: “You will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you ... and all peoples on earth will be blessed through you.”

Verses 7-8

The Israelites agree to the terms of the covenant without even knowing what they are – they trust God. Everyone agreed not just the priests and leaders.

Verses 9-15

The people have to consecrate themselves, it's a solemn and serious occasion. Getting dirty and having sex are not evil, but this was a special time of consecration which called for the avoidance of certain normal activities. Verses 12 and 13 tell us that elaborate rules kept people from even touching the mountain where God was to appear. God manifests himself to

us but not fully. Verses 14 and 15 tell us that Moses descended and made sure the consecration was done. For everyone to wash their clothes would have been a major undertaking with the limited water.

Verses 16-25

Moses goes to meet God on the mountain. I don't think verse 16 is a volcanic eruption or any natural phenomenon. Verse 17 the Israelites go to meet God, probably standing at the base of the mountain on one side of it. Verses 18 and 19 imply that the whole mountain was covered by smoke not just the peak of it. Verse 20 so God and the Israelites met through the intermediation of Moses. Verses 21 and 22 Moses is told to go and warn the people again not to touch the mountain. "Even the priests, who approach the LORD" could not presume to go up the mountain or to even appear at its base without having consecrated themselves just as the rest of the people had (vv. 10, 14–15). Except for Aaron the priests were in the same position as the people in being barred from going up the mountain (cf. v. 24).

Verses 24 and 25 imply to me that Moses went back down and heard the words of the commandments with the people at the bottom of the mountain. The command to bring Aaron up is for later, next time Moses goes up.

Chapter 20

Now we get the 10 commandments, but this gets the covenant underway but does not complete it – Leviticus 27:34 makes this clear. Indeed the book of Numbers carries the process on even beyond what is contained in Exodus.

Nothing in Exodus 20 is described as a "commandment" or the "law" or the like. Rather they are foundational rules – a bit like the constitution of the USA. All other law is to be interpreted in the light of these foundational principles just as the constitution of the USA overrides and conditions other law.

The first four of the 10 hang on the idea that we must love God (Jesus' first great command Matthew 22:40) and the last 6 hang on Jesus' second command to love the rest of mankind (although this is not part of the 10 and is hidden away in Leviticus – Leviticus 19:18).

Ancient civil law was also paradigmatic.

Verse 1-2

Sets the giving of the commands in context – what God has done for his people. God directs himself straight to the people not going through Moses.

Verse 3

Probably *al-panim* better translated you shall have no gods other than me.

Verses 4-6

Not only prohibits making idols but prohibits making images of God (that distorts the infinite reality of what he is and gives us a wrong idea of him). No humanly designed image can capture what God is like, it misleads us. We need to remember that whenever God revealed himself to the Israelites he never gave himself a concrete form. He appeared to Moses through a burning bush and accompanied the Israelites after the Exodus as a pillar of fire or cloud. This will be significant when we come to the golden calf.

That's why I think verses 4 to 6 need to be a separate second commandment; they make a different and wider point than our first commandment.

a reason is given for the prohibition against idols, namely, that "God is jealous" (verse 5). This jealousy is expressed in retribution (v. 5), but much more, indeed above all, in God's faithful love (v. 6). The second commandment carries both a warning and a promise. The retribution reaches to grandchildren (third generation) and great-grand-children (fourth generation), that is, all who live under the same roof as the offender, in the context of the extended family. Although I think the second part of our verse 5 makes it clear that it is only children who follow their parents in a hatred of God who will be punished. Children often copy the attitudes of their parents. Here is a solemn reminder that the consequences of our actions spread out to influence everyone within our total living environment.

But then in verse 6 comes the 'Good News' that God's faithful love (*hesed* in the original Hebrew), vastly outweighs the effects of God's "retribution." In contrast with the "third and fourth" generation of v5 who suffer retribution, we have the "thousand" generations of v6 who are shown God's love. The "Showing" here is literally "doing" This steadfast love is displayed through; the concrete gift of land, the overcoming of enemies, the fertility of flocks and fields, the creation of just and stable communities - all these are the deeds of God's "*hesed*".

No term is more theologically significant than *hesed*, translated in the NIV here as "love." It speaks of God's unmerited favor, his grace, by which he elects people to a covenant relationship and on the basis of which he extends all its blessings. In fact, the Hebrew word *hesed* and the usual Hebrew word for covenant *bērit* are used as synonymous (Deut 7:9) and interchangeable terms (Deut 7:12). This covenant *hesed* is a manifestation of pure grace. Within that covenant relationship, however, *hesed* is part of a two way process, a gift conditioned upon the love (*āhābâ*) and obedience of those who owe God their love and obedience (v6).

So we see that the whole thrust of this commandment is the preservation of the relationship between God and man which is characterized by love. It's the same kind of jealous covenant love that we experience for our husbands or wives. The attempt to limit God to some visual form, and the tendency to worship the attempted representation, means that the essential love relationship becomes distorted. On the other hand, the prohibition of images, getting rid of any visual substitutes for God, meant that man was constantly cast back upon his knowledge of God gained from the experience of God's living reality, especially the experience of the Exodus (5:6), so that man responded in love to an invisible but no less real God.

We also need to recognize how wide this commandment is for us today. The word translated "worship" in verse 9 *abad*, literally means "serve." Of course in religious terms worship is the essence of service, but the covenant nature of the Israelites relationship with God implies the idea of service beyond that. To bow down is to recognize the sovereignty of a god, but to serve is to express commitment to that sovereignty in a practical, tangible way. Israel had been redeemed from bondage or service in Egypt in order to serve Yahweh. To serve other gods, then, was to reverse the exodus and go back under bondage, thus betraying the grace and favor of Yahweh.

This explains the seriousness and severity of the divine reaction in v5: "I, the Lord your God, am a jealous God, punishing." Because God had redeemed his people from slavery to another

and had made a covenant with them, the Lord deserved and demanded their exclusive allegiance. This is why he is a “jealous God” (*ēl qannā* in the Hebrew), that is, one who is zealous for his own person and position as Israel’s sovereign God (cf. Deuteronomy 4:24; 6:15). The jealousy here is not the human emotion of envy but the proper insistence by God of his uniqueness and exclusiveness. Those who fail or refuse to recognize that exclusiveness by resorting to idolatry may expect certain punishment for that iniquity. The consequences are so great as to affect the extended family of the offender as we have already seen.

Verse 7

God’s name is important; it’s an expression of his character, who and what he is. That’s why we mustn’t misuse it.

The primary meaning of “misuse the name of the LORD” (*nāsāh šēm yahweh*, lit., “raise up Yahweh’s name for no good”) would appear to be invoking his name as guarantor of one’s words. Examples would include promising someone something “by Yahweh,” meaning: “I guarantee you that my promise is true, or Yahweh may kill me or otherwise punish me if I don’t keep my promise,” or giving legal testimony with the meaning of “I swear that my testimony in this legal matter/before this court is true with the guarantee that Yahweh may kill me or otherwise punish me if it isn’t.”

Verses 8-11

The Sabbath commandment is the longest of the 10. The purpose of the Sabbath cannot be limited *either* to a break from work one day a week *or* to the setting aside of one day a week for special attention to godliness. Rather, both are to be done on every Sabbath.

“Sabbath” is the English reflex of a common Hebrew word (*šabbāṭ*) meaning “stopping/stoppage/cessation.” The Sabbath is the “stopping [day]”, the day on which one’s regular work ceases both for the sake of giving laborers a break from their daily routine and for the sake of providing a focus on God that is periodically (weekly) heightened. Most English translations render this verse as “Remember⁴⁹ the Sabbath day, to keep it holy,” or “Remember the Sabbath day, and keep it holy,” rather than the NIV’s “remember the Sabbath day by keeping it holy.”

These verses are best translated: “Six days you may work and do all your laboring, but the seventh day is a Sabbath to the LORD your God. On it you must not do any laboring—you, or your son, or your daughter, your male worker, or your female worker, or your animals, or the resident alien who is inside your gates.” What this explanation portion of the word/commandment prohibits is not any sort of exertion, or the preparing of food, or the feeding or watering of animals, or anything else necessary to get through the day in an agrarian culture. Rather, it prohibits duplicating on the Sabbath any of the usual labors of the other six days that can possibly be stopped without actually causing someone or something harm. People and animals would still need to be fed; lactating animals would still need to be milked; priests would still work within the sanctuary. But to the extent possible, all workers were to receive a day of rest.

God himself exemplified this model of the Sabbath and Jesus endorsed it (Luke 6).

Verse 12

This is the Fifth commandment, the first of the ‘horizontal’ commandments. It’s the only commandment attached to a promise.

Read Colossians 3:12-23

God must be laughing when I teach on this because I Totally failed to honour it.

This was an important command for the Israelites as breaking it was a capital offence for which the son was stoned to death – Deuteronomy 21:18-21 and Exodus 21:15, 17.

Jesus also clearly thought it was important. He reaffirmed it (including the death penalty that went with it) and berated the Pharisees for encouraging Jewish youths to deny financial support to their parents and instead give the money to the Temple (Matthew 15:4-6). He also cited it as one of the important commands which the rich young ruler should obey (Matthew 19:19) and he often spoke of honouring His Father (John 8:49).

The command is also often cited with approval in Paul's epistles in the New Testament, such as in our reading today and in Ephesians chapter 6.

But, what does it mean for us today? Although the Old Testament commandments are no longer Law for Christians today in the sense that they were Law for the Israelites – because we have been released from the Law by the New Covenant in Christ – we must take these commandments seriously, especially where they are enthusiastically affirmed in the New Testament. Thus, it remains the task of the church to continue to proclaim this command today, even – perhaps especially – in a world where we find it difficult to define the terms 'father' and 'mother' any more. There are biological fathers and mothers who may or may not live with and care for their children. There are step parents, adoptive parents, surrogate parents and in-laws and even people of no relation whatsoever who fulfil some of the roles of parents in our lives. So exactly whom does this command cover?

Even when we have defined *who* it covers, does it matter *how* they behave as parents. What if they are abusive, neglectful or criminal? What if the demands of the two (or more) parents are in conflict – for example in a divorce situation? What about turning in a drug abusing parent or a parent molesting a sibling?

I think we have to start by looking at what it means to honour our parents. Dr Samuel Johnson defined honour as 'a scorn of meanness' and a modern dictionary definition is 'deferential recognition of another's worth or station'. I rather like original meaning of the Hebrew word translated as 'honour' which was 'to give weight to'. Modern writers often speak of this command as if it only spoke of 'obedience' to our parents, probably because Paul uses that word when he speaks of this commandment in Ephesians chapter 6:1 saying:

Children, obey your parents in the Lord, for this is right.

However, Paul obviously thought the command was wider than that, because in the next verse he says:

"Honour your father and mother"—which is the first commandment with a promise—

thus implying that he considered obedience to be only a part of 'honouring'. We should also note that he qualified the word 'obey' by the words 'in the Lord'. We are only required to obey our parents insofar as what they command is within God's Laws and not dishonouring to Him.

I believe we should interpret this command as meaning that children should give due weight, respect (which will normally include obedience), value and recognition to their parents. Adult 'children' should continue to treat their parents with respect and seriousness and to support them appropriately as they grow older. As with any other passage of scripture, we have to consider the message of scripture as a whole and not just one commandment. We need to look at issues such as violation of other scriptural laws, or indeed issues of breaking man made laws – which, as a general rule, scripture adjures us to keep.

We must also bear in mind that our parents generally have a wealth of experience. Thus Mark Twain said when I was 14 I couldn't believe how stupid my father was. By the time I was 21 I realised he had become quite smart. I couldn't believe just how much he had learned in just 7 years.

In my view adult children are not called into automatic obedience – a duty to always do what their parents want – rather they must consider all the needs and conditions applicable to both the parents and the situation and strive to do what is best and honouring to God.

I don't believe that the duty of adult children to support parents means that they must *personally* care for them no matter the cost to the rest of their family or their calling in the Lord – after all Jesus himself delegated the care of His mother to the disciple John when His Father called Him to go to His death on the cross (John 19:25-27). Thus I don't believe it is necessarily dishonouring to put a parent into a nursing home – especially if taking them into our home would mean that we couldn't properly care for our spouse and our own children. But, I do believe it would be dishonouring to leave our parents to waste away in a nursing home where we don't telephone or visit or to use a nursing home just as a place to dispose of them. This is not giving them respect or giving due weight to their needs.

Turning now to the issue of *who* this commandment applies to, I believe it can and should be broadened well beyond the persons who are our biological mothers and fathers. I think honour thy father and mother can be applied to adoptive parents, step parents, foster parents, carers and indeed all who fulfil what is essentially a parental role.

Let's move on to other broader issues surrounding this command, some of which were addressed in our reading today. We see that honouring parents is not meant to be a one way street – parents have a responsibility to conduct themselves so as to be worthy of honour. Parents also have a responsibility to deal wisely and not excessively harshly with their children so that their children will be encouraged and not driven into bad tempered and surly behaviour. As it says in verse 21 of our reading today

Fathers, do not embitter your children, or they will become discouraged.

So how should we conduct ourselves as parents? Firstly, we should be faithful and fair. This doesn't mean that we should not be firm. When the occasion demands we *must* be firm – children want and need limits -, but our words and actions should be tempered by love. We must also be constant so that our children learn without confusion.

Parents should also lead their children to God and train them properly. As it says in Ephesians 6:4

Fathers, do not exasperate your children; instead, bring them up in the training and instruction of the Lord.

Finally, all parents must give their children all the love they can.

Our reading also tells us that this command is meant to fit into the wider context of the family. Although it is unpopular, almost unacceptable, in our individualistic, post-modern society, I really believe wives are meant to set an example for our children. As it says in verse 18 of our reading

Wives, submit to your husbands, as is fitting in the Lord.

Of course, this is to be seen in the context of the greater duty of the husband towards the wife set out in the following verse

Husbands, love your wives and do not be harsh with them. Indeed in Ephesians chapter 6 Paul tells us that husbands must love their wives to the point of dying for them.

Here we need to bear in mind that an attitude of true love by the husband will be a sacrificial love and will show full regard by the husband for all the needs and desires of the wife.

BOTH husbands and wives must train their children to love and honour them as parents by the love and honour they show to each other as husband and wife. Thus the proper order in God's kingdom is 'Husbands love your wives', 'wives obey your husbands', 'children honour your parents', and then 'fathers don't provoke your children'.

Lack of adherence to these and other Biblical and Godly principles is precisely why we see our society in such disarray today. We see an enormous increase in crime, lawbreaking and violence. Let us remember that breaking the laws of our parents is but one step away from breaking the laws of our society.

What about the promise attached to today's commandment? This is often interpreted as a promise of individual long life to those who obey the command to honour their parents. However, I don't think that is by any means the whole of its meaning. I think the first 'you' in the promise

so that you may live long in the land the LORD your God is giving you.

refers to the Israelite nation as a whole rather than an individual 'you'. This makes much more sense of the remainder of the promise about living long in the land that God is giving them. It also fits well with the comments about the breakdown of law and order and society generally that I was just making.

I think we can also interpret the promise and indeed the whole command in terms of honouring our heavenly Father, who will give us not merely long life, but eternal life.

Continuing with the dual nature of this command, we see that there is clearly a demand to honour our earthly parents, but that it equally calls us to honour our heavenly Father and, in complete obedience to both aspects, we will be blessed by the promise with long life as nations and eternal life as individuals.

Finally, I just want to say that honouring our earthly fathers and mothers is no more than doing for them what God does for us every day – and in this crass, violent and vulgar world, what a witness that is to our God whose nature is love.

Verse 13

The commandment is expressed in just two words in the Hebrew, equivalent to “never murder” (see below). The KJV wording, “Thou shalt not kill,” was always a deficient translation, though it could be more nearly defended in the early seventeenth century, when “put to death,” “fall upon,” “smite,” and similar terms were commonly used for nonmurderous killing; so the word “kill” more often than it does today included the sense of murder.

The Hebrew term used here (*ršh*) is, however, specific to putting to death improperly, for selfish reasons rather than with authorization (as killing in the administration of justice or killing in divinely ordained holy war would be). God’s Old Covenant people, being a theocratic community, were delegated the right to take human life by his command, either in the form of his capital punishment laws or his direct holy war call.⁶³ No Israelite acting on his own could decide that he had the right to end someone’s life. Grammatically, the prohibition expressed in this and the following commandments, through the construction *lō’* + imperfect verb form, is perhaps most idiomatically rendered “you must not ...” or “you cannot ...” in modern English. This modal sense was once inherent in English in a wording such as “thou shalt not”/“you shall not,” but it is no longer automatically recognizable therein so that “you shall not” or “you will not” sound almost like predictions rather than the firm prohibitions they are in Hebrew. Moreover, the prohibition here and in the following commandments is not expressed through the vetitive (e.g., *’al* + imperfect), which would represent a temporary injunction against a behavior, but through the permanent negative imperative (*lō’* + imperfect), which could be rendered “never murder” or the like.

Little difference separates the practical outworking of this command today from its original application in ancient Israel. In the New Covenant the state takes the roles of administration of justice and declaration of war; the church cannot do such things. But otherwise, and from the point of view of the individual believer, the prohibition works exactly the same way: no unauthorized “private” person or group has the right to end a human life. Moreover, the ban on murder has no modifying conditions: taking one’s own life or ending someone else’s for purposes of “mercy” do not qualify as allowable exceptions.

Verse 14

Other prohibitions of sexual immorality and regulations for sexual purity appear later in the covenant stipulations, but the most important and basic of them is included in the Ten Words/Commandments: marital fidelity. No one is allowed to have sex with any married person except his or her spouse, and no married person is allowed to have sex with anyone other than his or her spouse.

Adultery was known in the ancient world as “the great sin.” Marriage is foundational to the creation order and to human society; husbands and wives can hardly function fully as one flesh if they do not trust each other. Sexual relations are the virtual seal of a marriage covenant, and adultery betrays the emotional-psychological intimacy that specially connects adult men and women within marriage.

This commandment does not explicitly condemn premarital sex, postmarital sex (as by a widow or widower), cohabitation without formal marriage, bestiality, or incest, all of which are dealt with elsewhere in various ways; but *by implication* it certainly does condemn all those practices. These other forms of sex outside marriage are indeed violations of God's laws, but it is sex outside marriage involving married people that is especially threatening to basic family stability and thus receives special focus among the Ten Commandments. Again the principle of law as paradigmatic is essential for appreciating the implications of this command: reasonable and careful extrapolation from the paradigm of the adultery law yields the realization that all sex outside of marriage, whether before, during, after, or instead of a person's actual legal marriage would be a violation of the divine covenant.

Likewise, the commandment against adultery does not explicitly outlaw polygamy, a practice that, in fact, is not outlawed in the Bible. It is tolerated in the Old Testament (Deut 21:15–17) and denigrated in the New Testament (1 Tim 3:2, 12; Titus 1:6) partly because ancient culture allowed it. Converts to Judaism or Christianity in the ancient world therefore often enough came from situations of polygamy, where a convert's divorcing all but one wife in order to achieve the desired monogamy would have represented an offense against marriage greater than polygamy. So polygamy was accordingly tolerated, but monogamy is everywhere in Scripture assumed as the ideal, as a creation ordinance (Gen 2:24) firmly reinforced by Jesus (Matt 19:5) and Paul (Eph 5:31).

The commandment also argues, implicitly, against divorce. If marriage is so important that it must be protected against adulteration—even the sort of adulteration that might occur in brief interludes—it certainly is important enough to protect against dissolution altogether. Accordingly, divorce cannot be used as a mechanism to get around adultery (Deut 24:1–4; Jer 3:1), is condemned in the strongest divine terms in the Old Testament (Mal 2:16), and in Jesus' teaching represents the equivalent of adultery in any situation except where adultery itself is the justifiable reason for divorce (Matt 5:32; 19:9 and par.).

Verse 15

Stealing is taking something that does not belong to you without permission. Legal possession and personal ownership of things are permitted implicitly by this commandment, which assumes that stealing is possible, something that would technically not be possible in a completely communal society. There are, of course, no completely communal societies; ownership of things exists in all families and neighborhoods and entire societies, no matter what their economic organizational structure. But with ownership comes responsibility, and respect for ownership is a responsibility in itself as well. This command is reinforced by a variety of individual laws on stealing in Exodus (22:1–16), Leviticus (Lev 6:2–5; 19:11, 13), and Deuteronomy (24:7). Stealing threatens the social order and causes pain to others by undermining the ability to possess with sure access things that are useful and needful. The food thief makes others go hungry; the work animal thief interrupts farming; the kidnapper tears apart a family; the clothing thief makes another suffer from the sun or the cold. This command against stealing is also reinforced repeatedly in the New Testament (Matt 19:18 and parallels; Rom 2:21; 13:9; 1 Cor 6:10; Eph 4:28; Titus 2:10; 1 Pet 4:15).

Verse 16

The most literal meaning of this commandment is its juridical meaning that we mustn't tell untruths about our neighbour before a court of law or where it might damage their reputation. But, who is our neighbour? Well, this commandment uses the Hebrew word *rea*, or neighbour, in the sense of anyone you happen to come into contact with rather than the more

narrow sense of someone living near you. Here we need to remember that Jesus himself gave the word “neighbour” the widest possible meaning in the parable of the good or ‘compassionate’ Samaritan (Luke 10:25-37). Let’s start off by looking at this commandment in its juridicial context.

This commandment was particularly important in the context of the justice system in the ancient world. In those days people who were charged with a crime had little protection. They were not presumed innocent until proven guilty, but rather presumed guilty until proven innocent. There were few standards for the presentation of evidence and often the accused didn’t have much chance to mount a defence. Actually the Jewish legal system was one of the better systems. Many ancient courts could convict on the basis of the testimony of a single witness, but Jewish courts were better, they required the testimony of at least two witnesses.

In the days before surveillance cameras, fibre analysis and DNA testing, almost everything depended on the testimony of witnesses. It came down to one person’s word against another and since many offences were capital crimes, often the defendant’s life was at stake. The word of a false witness could literally be fatal. Look at the example of Naboth who was put to death on the testimony of false witnesses by King Ahab, just so that Ahab could profit by taking over Naboth’s vineyard (I Kings 21:1-16).

One protection for the accused was in the execution of judgement. In relation to the death penalty the accuser had to throw the first stone (Deuteronomy 17:7) and if the allegations proved to be false the accuser was punished (Deuteronomy 19:18-19). God’s people were not allowed to bear false witness against one another. As the prophet Zechariah said “Speak the truth to each other and render sound judgement in your courts.” (Zechariah 8:16b).

We need to remember that today. Where there is no truth there can be no justice. The whole system of justice is also relevant. Jochem Douma (author of a well respected book on the Ten Commandments) says of the Ninth Commandment:

“we must always include reference to the significance of the system of justice. Past interpreters of the ninth commandment never hesitated to mention various persons who have a role in administering justice.a *judge* that he be incorruptible and not judge rashly.... They required of the *accuser* that he never accuse somebody unnecessarily, out of antipathy or revenge. They expected the *witness* to tell the truth and nothing but the truth. The *lawyer* was forbidden to call black white and white black, even when he had the valuable function of coming to the aid of the accused and demanding that proof of guilt—if there was any—be airtight. These interpreters required the *accused* to confess his guilt where such guilt was proved.”

In other words, everyone involved in the entire legal process has an obligation to maintain the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth. Well, unfortunately, I don’t think that bears much resemblance to our legal system today.

But, you know a courtroom isn’t the only place where we can give false testimony. Over the last few weeks we’ve seen that the Ten Commandments work by referring to the most extreme form of the particular sin they’re talking about. So for example the sixth commandment forbidding murder extends to being extremely angry with someone. Similarly, I believe the Ninth Commandment doesn’t just forbid untruth in the juridicial context, but forbids any kind of lying or dishonesty in general. Look at what Leviticus 19:11 says:

““Do not steal. “Do not lie. “Do not deceive one another.” (Leviticus 19:11 NIV)
this is not precisely following the words of the Ten Commandments, but the way stealing, lying and dishonesty are linked together makes it clear that the concepts of false testimony and lying or dishonesty overlap – just as common sense would imply.

This is confirmed by the prophet Hosea who accused the Israelites of “cursing, lying, murder, stealing and adultery”. Hosea was clearly referring to the Ten Commandments, but he didn’t use the Hebrew word for “false testimony” (*shaqar*) but instead used a more general word that refers to any kind of lying (*kachash*). So I believe it’s clear that the Ninth Commandment means “You shall not lie”. And it’s not just about lies that are told in the courtroom, but about lying rumours we whisper to our friends, the rumours we whisper in the pews in church – remember the commandment refers to falsehood *against* our neighbour. But, it also extends to any kind of untruth.

There are many, many different ways to lie. *Roget’s Thesaurus* (a kind of dictionary of synonyms and antonyms) offers an impressive list of synonyms for lying. A falsehood can be described as an invention, an equivocation, a falsification, a fabrication, or a prevarication. Dishonesty also comes in all different sizes. There are the big lies—the whoppers and the grand deceptions. Then there are all the little lies we tell—the half-truths, the flatteries, and the fibs. What we say may be true, as far as it goes, but we leave out the details that might put us at a disadvantage. Or we say something that is technically true, yet nevertheless intended to deceive. We overstate our accomplishments, putting ourselves in the best possible light. At the same time we exaggerate other people’s failings, thinking and saying the worst about others. We mislead, misquote, and misinterpret. We twist people’s words, taking things out of context. In these and so many other ways, we exchange the truth for a lie.

Our speech is corrupted by our sin; so it has the power to do great damage. The Apostle James said that the tongue “corrupts the whole person, sets the whole course of his life on fire, and is itself set on fire by hell” (James 3:6). Like a massive forest fire set by a single careless individual, a lying tongue consumes everything in its path. James also said, “no man can tame the tongue. It is a restless evil, full of deadly poison” (James 3:8). It’s not an exaggeration to say that the tongue is the most dangerous part of the body!

Paul often told us to watch what we say. He warned the Corinthians about “quarrelling ... slander, gossip” (2 Corinthians 12:20). He told the Galatians that “discord” and “dissensions” were acts of the sinful nature (Galatians 5:19, 20). He told the Ephesians to get rid of “slander” and “malice” (Ephesians 4:31). These sins are breaches of the Ninth Commandment.

When the Bible condemns gossip, it means something more than just casual talk. Gossip is talking about people in a way that damages their reputation with others. Reputations are important. The Bible says, “A good name is more desirable than great riches; to be esteemed is better than silver or gold” (Proverbs 22:1). Often the victims of gossip never get the chance to defend themselves.

Most gossip contains misinformation or lies, but even true statements can violate the Ninth Commandment. A true statement can be made to the wrong person for the wrong reason, but more often it’s a version of the truth which has a false malicious spin on it. This is harmful. As Martin Luther put it: “reputation is something quickly stolen, but not quickly returned”.

There's another side to this too. It's wrong for us to gossip, but it's also wrong for us to listen to gossip – to quote an old rabbinic saying slander “kills three: the one who speaks it, the one who listens to it, and the one about whom it is spoken.” The Puritan Thomas Watson made a similar point when he said “He that raises a slander, carries the devil in his tongue; and he that receives it, carries the devil in his ear.” When someone tries to tell us gossip we should say “You know, this is starting to sound like gossip; we need to talk about something else.” Or we should say “Wait, let's pray about this”. All too often people who complain about others aren't willing to do the hard spiritual work of helping them to grow in holiness and godliness. That's what we should be doing instead of gossiping.

Now you know most commandments are two sided rules – they forbid something but also require something. The Ninth Commandment is no exception. It forbids lying and it requires us to tell the truth. That's not always easy, especially in our post-modern society, which denies the reality of objective truth. People today believe that all truth is relative – my truth is as good as your truth. Actually that is the greatest deceit, the biggest lie, of all. God's truth is eternal. The ninth commandment asserts that there is real objective truth. Charles Colson said that we're in a post truth society. George Orwell said, “In a time of universal deceit, telling the truth is a revolutionary act.” Well, we Christians are called to be revolutionaries, because we live in a time of universal deceit. These days the biggest lie is postmodernism, the idea that there is no universal truth only different versions of reality. That's a big lie which makes it possible for academics, politicians and journalists – and indeed many other categories – to tell all sorts of lies. Fewer than half of young Christians believe there is any objective standard of truth and if most Christians don't believe that then non-Christians certainly won't believe it!

But, as Christians, we're called to be people of the truth. If we're scholars we must be careful with our quotations and fair with our criticisms. If we're in business we must deal honestly with all. Whatever lies people usually tell in our line of work, we're called on to tell the truth because we serve a truth telling God. God is true about everything. Everything that God has ever said—including every word on every page of the Bible—is absolutely, unmistakably, and entirely true. Therefore, we can always take God at his word, as the apostle John said: “Your word is truth” (John 17:17a). If God is true to us, then we must be true to him, and also to one another. The Scripture says, “Do not lie. Do not deceive one another. Do not swear falsely by my name and so profane the name of your God. I am the Lord” (Leviticus 19:11, 12). It also says, “each of you must put off falsehood and speak truthfully to his neighbour, for we are all members of one body” (Ephesians 4:25). John Calvin summarized the Biblical teaching as follows: “The purpose of this [Ninth] commandment is: since God (who is truth) abhors a lie, we must practice truth without deceit toward one another.” Honesty really is the best policy, not simply because it helps us get along with other people, but because our interpersonal communication ought to be grounded in the character of God.

But, sometimes as Christians we are required to speak out. Sometimes sin needs to be confronted, and in those cases keeping the ninth commandment means “speaking the truth *in love*” (Ephesians 4:15, emphasis added). I've added the emphasis to *in love* because, unfortunately, the love is usually what's missing. Here the Ninth Commandment means saying the honest thing – when it's our duty to say it – in a loving way.

Nothing tells us the seriousness of lying better than the story of the Fall. The devil lied to Eve – Jesus said that Satan is the father of lies (John 8:44) – and the devil persuaded Eve of

the truth of his lie of his denial of God's goodness - and the result was the fall of man, the mess that we're in right now and the need for Jesus to come and die for our sins. There are so many horrifying stories in the Bible of the consequences of lying. I think another really telling story is that of the death of Ananias and Sapphira. They lied about giving their wealth to the church to make themselves seem more righteous and worthy than they really were and they died for it. When the first Christians sold all their property and gave the proceeds to God's work they were making a public gesture of total commitment to Jesus Christ. A man from Cyprus named Joseph did this and the church honoured him and gave him a new name "Barnabas" which means 'son of encouragement'. Ananias and Sapphira must have seen this and wanted the same recognition too, but they falsified their commitment, they lied to God. They broke the Ninth Commandment. The results of their deception were very serious, they died for it.

If there's one thing God hates it's the lies that Christians tell to make themselves look better and more righteous than they really are. Our testimony is - or should be - that we are unrighteous, that there is no way we could ever be saved apart from the grace of God in Jesus Christ. The real truth about us is that we are so guilty that the Son of God had to be crucified to pay for our sins. So why do we ever pretend to be anything more than sinners saved by grace? To act as though we're pure and righteous is a lie. But even more it is a denial of the grace of God, which alone has the power to save us.

Even though I'm up here preaching to you, I'm a sinner. I'm guilty of all kinds of sin. Most of the time I'm able to cover it up (at least I think so) but God knows. So, what's the truth about you? What lies have you been telling? What are the lies you tell yourself? What are the lies you try to sell to others? The biggest lie is the one we live with every day, the lie we work so hard to maintain and that's the lie that we are on the inside what we pretend to be on the outside. But Jesus said, "Woe to you, ... you hypocrites!... on the outside you appear to people as righteous but on the inside you are full of hypocrisy and wickedness" (Matt. 23:27, 28).

You know, something wonderful happens when we're willing to confess the real truth about ourselves and all our sin. What happens is that we are able to see the real truth about Jesus and what he has done for our salvation. It is only when we tell the truth about our sin that we are able to see how much we need a Saviour—the Saviour who said, "you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free" (John 8:32).

Verse 17

Coveting (*hmd*) is desiring—wanting or craving something. The commandment does not say "do not covet," which would make no sense since much coveting is permissible or even commendable as long as the thing being coveted is something a person *should* desire and not something that already belongs to someone else exclusively (cf. e.g., coveting [desiring] something as perfectly proper as oak trees, Isa 1:29, or coveting [desiring] something as wonderfully proper as the Messiah, Isa 53:2; the verb is used of God's own coveting [desiring] of Mount Zion in Ps 68:16). Therefore the commandment is necessarily worded with objects for the verb "covet," these objects being things that one should not desire because they already belong to someone else. "House" can as easily be translated "family and property"; other objects forbidden to covet are someone else's spouse, servants, animals, or "anything that belongs to your neighbor." Although some traditions have separated this commandment into two (coveting a neighbor's "house" as separate from coveting a neighbor's wife), there appears to be no cogent reason for this division.⁷⁶ The entire verse is a

prohibition against any sort of coveting of what someone else already rightfully has, with enough examples given as to leave no doubt that nothing properly owned by someone else can be coveted. Again the principle of paradigmatic law applies: from the list any reasonable person can extrapolate to all other instances of things that cannot be coveted. This commandment, like the prohibition against stealing, implies that God allows people to own things that belong to them and not to others.

Although it may seem to be belaboring the obvious to say so, the final commandment insists that God's covenant people realize that wishing to have good and proper things is good but that wishing to have the wrong things is bad. What people wish for has a major role to play in what kind of society they will create. People able to curtail their wishing, so that it is limited to things they *should* desire, are people who contribute good to a society; those who want what they cannot properly have undermine a society's moral fiber. The commandment has no penalty attached; improper coveting is hardly enforceable by human beings. God here calls for his people to take an approach to their neighbors that respects them and their possessions—an approach they must voluntarily agree to if they want to please him. Coveting is the starting point of stealing (forbidden by the eighth commandment) and, in the case of coveting someone else's spouse, adultery (the seventh commandment).

Verses 18-21

Hearing God speak audibly was frightening for the Israelites—so much so that they demanded that thereafter Moses should always relay God's words to them. This makes considerable sense in light of the consistent biblical witness to the ear-shattering volume of the voice of God. In all other cases where God is recorded as speaking audibly, the sound is described as deafeningly loud. Moses was somehow able to endure God's voice, presumably by special divine grace, but the average Israelite found it so terrifying that he wanted nothing more of it. It was not merely the sound of God's words, of course, that had such an effect: "The people saw⁸² the thunder and lightning and heard the trumpet and saw the mountain in smoke," and that combination of sensory data along with the voice of God itself was too much for them, so "they trembled with fear" and "stayed at a distance."

This was no mere choice of convenience for the people. They perceived that they could not repeatedly endure having to hear God speak directly to them ("Do not have God speak to us or we will die," v. 19). As an accommodation, Moses thereafter approached God closely, but the people "stood far away" (NIV "remained at a distance") as v. 21 states. What can be learned from this? Simply that the presence of God is so threatening to less than entirely holy people that his presence in this world, even among his own people, must be limited so as not to overwhelm humans. This phenomenon is a reflection of the contrast between God's holiness and human sin. He cannot abide sin in his presence, so the closer he is to a sinner, the more difficult it is for the sinner to survive. Thus the full glory of personal contact with God that awaits believers in heaven is not yet manifest. Christ has shown the glory of God but in human dress; the indwelling Holy Spirit brings the person of God into the very spirit of every believer, but he arrives in a gentle, inviting manner, not a forcing, overpowering manner. Thus Paul could warn against quenching the Spirit⁸⁴ because human beings can, indeed, take negative advantage of the Spirit's limited, restricted presence and simply refuse to give active place to him at all.

Verse 20 says that the fear of God should have kept the Israelites from sinning, but tragically it didn't work and they were very soon to break one of the main commandments.

The point of v. 21 is that Moses kept climbing the mountain, getting closer and closer to the top where the dark cloud of God's glory was located (19:18–20) and where Moses had already been before he had descended to hear the Ten Words along with the people (19:21, 24–25) whereas the people remained at the base of the mountain (19:17) as instructed in 19:12–13, 21–22, 24. Thus Moses (alone or with those allowed specially to accompany him such as Aaron; cf. 19:24) went genuinely close to the specially manifested presence of God. The others could not, by divine command and by their own recognition, and therefore they did not. This forms the pattern for future passages related to reception of the law at Sinai: Moses heard it directly, and the people heard it indirectly from him.

Verses 22-26

Proper worship involves a combination of things that must not be done and things that must be done. Paramount among things that must not be done in the biblical definition of worship are putting any other gods before Yahweh and practicing idolatry, that is, that which is found in the instruction of the first two of the Ten Words/Commandments. In light of their importance, these first two commandments are repeated immediately in vv. 22–23. But that is probably not the only reason for inclusion of the first two of the ten (with slightly modified wording). Rather, the first two function as an incipit (the first words of a piece used as a sort of title, or way of referring to the whole), suggesting the whole ten. This pattern is virtually identical to that seen already in 15:1–21, where the full text of the Song of Moses was presented (15:1–18); and then as part of a summary of the “response,” the incipit was cited as a way of saying that Miriam taught the same song to the women of Israel (15:21). In effect, then, the point God made to Moses may be paraphrased thus: “Tell the Israelites, ‘You have seen for yourselves how I have spoken the Ten Words/Commandments to you from heaven.’ ”

In this reminder to the Israelites of what they had just seen and heard, four factors are prominent. (1) Moses was now the intermediary, so God spoke through him instead of directly to the people (“the LORD said to Moses, “Tell the Israelites ...”). (2) The Israelites were witnesses to their own obligation (cf. Josh 24:22; Matt 23:31) because they had *seen* (or perceived, i.e., seen and heard) for themselves the whole process. (3) God had “spoken ... from heaven” to them; he was not merely some god who lived atop Mount Sinai, but his presence there was a localized manifestation of himself, whose real dwelling place is heaven. (4) They had to keep the Ten Words/Commandments, of which the first two are summarized as an incipit reference to all ten.

In verse 23 references to silver and gold don't mean they could make idols of other materials, it's just that silver and gold were materials of which pagan idols were commonly made.

Altars were necessary for sacrifices, which were in turn necessary for worship. At this early point in the covenant, God gave the Israelites a brief overview of altar construction in anticipation of their need to worship him properly. Now that he was becoming their covenant God, it was important that they be able to respond fully to him in worship, not merely repeating the practices of the past or simply borrowing from pagans the concepts and procedures of worship and sacrifice.

The Israelites had already experienced constructing and worshipping at an altar (Exod 17:15). The use of altars had shown itself very early, indeed was assumed from the start, in patriarchal tradition (Gen 8:20; 12:7; 13:4, 18; 22:9; 26:25; 33:20; 35:1–7), and Israel would eventually receive instructions for a far more elaborate altar to become a permanent, portable

part of the tabernacle accoutrements (Exod 27:1–8). Meanwhile, however, there was need for an altar that could be built quickly and simply so that the Israelites could commence worshiping as a united covenant community. Moses built such an altar, as described here, and as soon as the Israelites had given their assent to the “Covenant Code,” they began offerings on that altar, as narrated in 24:3–8.

The initial altar God wanted was very simple: made of dirt (“an altar of earth,” v. 24) or optionally of stone that was not cut, shaped stone but simply found stone crudely fitted together (“do not build it with dressed stones, for you will defile it if you use a tool on it”). The insistence on a simple—even primitive—altar relates to two factors: holiness and idolatry. Holiness is belonging to God; the altar must be his and his alone, a part of the means by which he accepts unholy people and makes them holy, through the transference of guilt from them to an animal. Therefore the altar could not be something of which humans could take ownership because they shaped it and finished it with the same sorts of tools they might use for any mundane masonry project. Likewise, it must not be fancy enough to become like or to function as an idol, a thing that human hands had made yet was revered as possessing divine qualities.

Chapter 21

We now start on a section which gives the laws for the Israelites more detail. The principles behind the laws derive from the 10 commandments, but they needed some elaboration.

Verses 1-11

These concern the care of servants.

The various Hebrew terms translated by terms such as “servant,” “slave,” “maidservant,” occur more than a thousand times in the Old Testament. The present passage reflects the broad semantic range encompassed by these terms and the concepts to which they refer. Although the laws in Exod 21:1–11 address primarily the circumstances of six-year contract servants, they do not *implicitly* distinguish among categories of employees. The most common vocabulary word used for the servant is *‘ebed*, which can mean “worker,” “employee,” “servant,” or “slave.” Anyone in any of these categories came under the protection of Yahweh’s covenant law. The laws of this section also do not differentiate types of employers: the standard term used here, *ba‘al*, can mean “boss,” “employer,” “master,” or “owner.” Similarly, the words translated “buy” in 21:2 (*qānā*) and “sell” in 21:7–8 (*mākar*) can refer to any financial transaction related to a contract, much as in modern sports terminology a player can be described as being “bought” or “sold” from one team to another. Players are not actually the property of the team that “owns” them except as regards the exclusive right to their employment as players of that sport.

Much misunderstanding of Israelite law has arisen from failure to appreciate the analogous distinction that prevailed in ancient Israel. When the law was properly followed, persons who were servants/slaves/workers/employees held their positions by reason of a formal contract that related primarily to the job that they had “signed up” to perform, for a period of time, much as one enlists in the military today. In addition, some of the misunderstanding of biblical laws on service/slavery arises from unconscious analogy to modern Western hemisphere slavery, which involved the stealing of people of a different race from their homelands, transporting them in chains to a new land, selling them to an owner who possessed them for life without obligation to any restrictions and who could resell them to someone else (although such did also occur in the ancient world). Whether one translates *‘ebed* as “servant,” “slave,” “employee,” or “worker,” it is clear that the biblical law allowed for no such practices in Israel. Indeed, the law reflects the fact that when obediently practiced

by “boss/employer/owner” and “servant/slave/employee/worker” alike, Israelite service could be so beneficial to a worker that he or she would choose to enlist for a lifetime with the same employer (21:5–6).

What were the different categories of servant/slave? First, there were foreign-born servants whose lives were spared in war and who were allowed to live indefinitely, on the condition that they become permanent workers in Israel (Josh 9:23; 1 Sam 4:9). This is frequently referred to as “chattel slavery.” Second, there were six-year servants who contracted to work for an employer for six years in return for wages and other benefits. Third, there were servants born in the boss’s household who owed the boss something for the housing and food he had provided them until such time as they might choose to leave his property and/or employment. Fourth, there were various sorts of temporary employees and permanent employees who may have worked for a given individual under various sorts of arrangements, including day laboring. These categories of slaves/servants/workers were employed in all sorts of ways: as personal servants, as farm workers, as conscript laborers (1 Kgs 9:21; 2 Chr 8:7–9), as temporary “hired hand,” and the like.

We should note also that virtually all industry in ancient times was “household” or “cottage” industry. Corporations or business partnerships as we know them in modern times did not exist. Almost all business was “small business” in the sense of family owned and family operated business, and someone who was in any sense an “employee,” not the owner of his own business, worked for the head of a family, usually lived with or near that family on its property, and was paid according to a formal written or verbal “contract” that was somewhat more like the terms of enlistment used to enroll someone into military service today than a casual agreement expecting only certain hours to be worked at a place of employment.

Finally, Israel’s service/slavery laws should be understood in terms of their own history of slavery in Egypt. The Egyptians made the Israelites slaves on the basis of their ethnicity, forced them to serve as slaves for life, did not compensate them properly, if at all, and worked them unbearably hard as a means of keeping them weak and/or causing at least some to die under the burden of their slavery (1:9–14). Against this sort of historical experience, the Bible’s laws protect all sorts of workers, guaranteeing them the right to gain their freedom after a set period of time (21:1–4) as against the Egyptian practice of permanently enslaving Israel. Biblical law allowed service out of love rather than out of necessity (21:5–6) as opposed to involuntary service under oppressive masters in Egypt. Biblical law also gave immediate freedom to those who had in any way been physically abused (21:26–27) as opposed to the severe abuse the Egyptians had imposed upon the Israelites. God’s laws, then, provided divinely enforced covenant protections for those who worked for former slaves and made sure the former slaves did not return evil for evil once they had the opportunity to do so. Indeed, God’s laws implicitly condemned the Egyptian treatment of the Israelites as illegal by prohibiting the very practices the Egyptians had used to suppress and weaken God’s people in Egypt.

Type of law: casuistic (its specific circumstance does not apply to people who do not employ or are not employed as servants). Paradigmatic application: virtually any contractual work arrangement.

The normal contractual arrangement for an Israelite (or, more broadly, as here, *Hebrew*) worker involved a service period of six years, which was “bought” by an employer who would normally be an individual with a large enough farm or other enterprise to be able to use the services of employees beyond the work his family members could do. There is no specification about how the money would be paid. Some servants may have agreed to a lump sum payment at the end of their six years of service, akin to what Jacob thought he was

agreeing to when he obtained permission to marry Rachel (Gen 29:18–20). Others may have bargained for a lump sum payment at the very outset of their employment, which they then “worked off” over the next six years (akin to the arrangement Jacob was tricked into by Laban in Gen 29:23–30). Still others must have agreed to periodic payments during the six years of their term of service.

Women could also be employers (Prov 31:15), and female servants/slaves surely also fell under the purview of this law’s statute of limitations for the length of a contract. To whom was the money paid to secure a worker? Most commonly to the worker himself, who “sold himself” into the service of another (Lev 25:48, 50; Jer 34:14) for the money it would provide for him and/or his loved ones and who knew that along with the money would also come the promise of housing, food, and, depending on the contract, clothing. In the same way that military service, with its guaranteed pay, housing, food, clothing, and other benefits has always been a way out of poverty for many persons in many countries, so servanthood/slavery functioned similarly in ancient Israel.

Verses 3-4

deal with a servant who marries another servant of the same master. The purpose was to protect both servant and master – the servant couldn’t simply walk away with his bride who was already indentured to the master. So the man could wait for the wife to finish her term of service after which she would be free, or he could buy the woman out of her contract (if he could raise the money) – or he could agree to work permanently for the master. It’s this kind of voluntary permanent service that we now come to.

Verses 5-6

Deals with married or unmarried servants who want to remain permanently in employment. He is to be brought before God and marked so that there can be no further dispute (the priests would serve as witnesses).

Verses 7-11

Deal with protections for female servants. Women were often sold into service in expectation of marriage. Verse 11 gives her a lot of rights – a free way out if she isn’t cared for (food, clothing and sex). Marriage was not to be term limited like service.

Paul was concerned that married couples engaged in regular sexual activity (1 Corinthians 7:3-5). Scripture forbids sex outside marriage but requires it within marriage.

Verses 12-36

Deal with injuries to people and animals

Verses 12-14

Deal with intentional and unintentional homicide. Intentional homicide merits capital punishment with no exceptions or exemptions. Unintentional homicide (e.g. running over someone with a wagon or hitting them with a tool) was not punishable by death, but the ancient world had a revenge killing system and this law is designed to alleviate that. The wording here anticipates the idea of “cities of refuge” (Numbers 35:6-34). But even the altar of the tabernacle was not to be protection for a deliberate murderer. Altar sanctuary didn’t work (1 Kings 1:50-52 and 1 Kings 2:29).

Verses 15-17

Deal with assaults on parents. In verse 15 attack even without serious injury merits the death penalty. The Hebrew word translated attack denotes some kind of serious attack designed to disable someone. It's not a mere slap. Verse 16 makes kidnapping someone a capital crime. The Hebrew extends this not only to the original kidnappers, but to people who traffic in such slaves. In verse 17 "curse" is a bad translation, it could better be rendered serious repudiation of some sort.

Verses 18-21

Deal with injury or threatening injury. In verses 18 and 19 it doesn't matter who starts the fight, there is liability for serious injury. Verses 20 and 21 differentiate corporal punishment from fighting, although if a servant dies it's murder.

Verses 22-27

Deal with permanent injury. Verse 22 is probably a bad translation (the words used are obscure), but it probably covers preventing a woman from having further children. If the woman is not seriously injured there is still punishment (a fine), but if there is serious injury then the punishment is "like for like" – the punishment is to be appropriate to the injury. This is called "Talion Law" – this wasn't literally and "eye for an eye", the precise nature of the penalty was left up to the judge. Verses 26 and 27 illustrate this well.

Verses 28-36

These are laws about injuries caused by or to animals. The basic principle behinds these laws is that people are responsible for the animals they own, or for dangerous situations they create that end up harming someone else's animals. Almost everyone in the ancient world was a farmer. Even potters and masons typically planted crops and kept animals, though on a smaller scale than those who farmed full-time. Accordingly, laws governing circumstances of injury related to farm animals were needed and would have been referred to regularly by Israelite judges. If Moses had received the law in our day, these laws might have been replaced by some sample laws on motor vehicle homicide and accidents. In the same way that traffic accidents and crimes are common today, animal accidents and crimes were common in biblical times.

The bull is used as a sample animal because it was quite likely to cause injury and cause the most serious injuries. Judges could reason down the scale from there. The principle is that people who own animals are responsible for their behaviour.

Verses 33 and 34 cover causing the death of someone else's animal. The talk about a pit is just an example.

Verses 35 and 36 deal with a difficult situation practically. It will be difficult to tell who is responsible so everything is divided. But in verse 36 where there is clear responsibility, the one with the known dangerous animal must suffer the loss.

Chapter 22

The first 17 verses deal with the protection of property. No jail system was envisaged in Israel. I don't think this was just because they were a nomadic people as the law looks forward to being settled in the Promised Land. The advantage of restitution over residency is at least fourfold. (1) It compensates the victims of a crime more generously and more immediately than is the case in modern Western societies. (2) It requires the offender to deal

directly with the person he has offended and to face the effects of his crime on that person. (3) It permits a repentant offender to continue a productive life immediately upon making restoration. (4) And it does not require society to provide housing, food, and clothing for the duration of the offender's imprisonment.

Verse 1

Simple compensation for deliberately stealing animals. Could be extrapolated to other property.

Verses 2-3

Modern law statutes typically define burglary approximately as "breaking and entering in the nighttime with the intent to commit a felony." Modern case law has allowed homeowners to apply lethal force in defending their living quarters at nighttime, even if an intruder turns out to have been unarmed. The theory behind this day-night differentiation (i.e., between burglary and mere breaking and entering) relates to the decreased ability to see at night, especially in times and places where electric lighting may not be present or may not be sufficiently present.

There are four particular reasons for this. First, it may be assumed that a person who has legitimate business to do around someone else's house or property will do it in the daytime when visibility for working properly is good; thus, only a person with malicious intent would be entering and/or picking up and/or carrying things away from someone else's house during the night. Second, defending one's property at night, when the ability to see is limited, means that one cannot be as subtle in the application of force as might be possible during the daytime, especially because of the difficulty of seeing whether or not an intruder has a weapon. Third, a homeowner who has just been awakened from sleep by an intruder cannot be expected to react as calmly as could someone who is wide awake and will feel far more vulnerable to the sort of violence he may assume could be applied to him at any moment than would be the case in the daytime. Fourth, in the daytime one can call others to one's aid to subdue a thief; in the night this is much more difficult and could more easily result in the wrong person's being subdued.

Thus the present law allowed the use of deadly force against intruding thieves from sundown to sunup, but not during the daylight. The property owner could still defend against theft in the daytime but could not use lethal force in the process. The law, in other words, did not allow unlimited freedom to the victim of a crime to defend or retaliate. Even a criminal caught in the act of a serious crime had protections; conversely, even the victim of a serious crime could be prosecuted for murder if he resisted more violently than could be justified (thus the specific mention of being "guilty of bloodshed").

The second part of verse 3 indicates that persons taking someone into six year servitude often paid a lump sum at the beginning.

Verse 4

Reduces the restitution when the damage is less.

Verses 5-6

Govern damage from neglect or carelessness.

Verses 7-15 govern responsibility for property. It was essential that Israelites understand and accept responsibility for the godly care of property, whether things or animals. Property entrusted by one person to another required acceptance of responsibility both by the giver and the receiver, and the laws that follow spell this out in a way that indicates its importance for keeping Yahweh's covenant in all aspects of life.

Verses 7-9

Govern safekeeping of property and disputes over ownership of property.

Verses 10-13

Also govern safekeeping of property – they extend beyond animals.

Verses 14-15

Cover borrowing or renting of property (again this extends beyond animals). Verse 15 clarifies the responsibility further in two facets: (1) If one borrowed or rented an animal along with the owner, it was the owner's job to look out for the welfare of his animal, not the borrower's. (2) If one rented an animal, the rental fee was expected to include "insurance" on the animal rented out. The owner must absorb the cost of an animal rented out that was then injured or killed while under the rental contract. As long as both parties knew that this was the arrangement (and the law was given to make sure that both would), then each knew where the risk lay.

Verses 16-17

You can't get out of marital responsibility just by having pre-marital sex. This isn't about treating women as property, but the bride price was a financial responsibility to compensate the family. The bride price had to be paid even if marriage didn't take place.

Sexual intercourse functions as the sign of the covenant of marriage whether or not other formal, legal undertakings have been completed. In other words, sexual intercourse makes a couple "one flesh" or married *virtually* even if not legally and properly (as Paul contends in 1 Cor 6:16). Thus a couple who have engaged in sexual intercourse before marriage are "as if" married, and the bride price is due the woman's family whether or not they are actually allowed to get married.

Note, however, that neither here nor in 1 Cor 6:16 does the Bible direct that people who have had sexual intercourse without the benefit of marriage *must* go on to marry. Their virtual marriage is not regarded as an *actual* marriage in God's sight, and no biblical ethic demands that they make their virtual marriage legal by actually marrying. The law is worded to describe the situation in which a man "seduces" a woman, but it could be worded the other way around. No matter who seduces whom, the woman's potential bride price has been put at jeopardy, and the man's responsibility to pay it is therefore imposed.

Paying a bride price wasn't regarded as reducing women to poverty in ancient Israel. Part of the utility of a bride price was the way it forced a man to make a full and formal arrangement for marriage that properly involved both his interests and those of his bride-to-be, as well as the interests of his family and hers. The bride price requirement necessarily involved the families in substantial formal negotiations, and the price showed that something serious and important was at stake. The betrothal/bride price system was designed to make marriage harder to come by than what could be achieved on whim or quick decision, and it elevated marriage accordingly because people instinctively value what is hard and costly to

get. So when one didn't go through this process and had sex, the bride price had to be paid anyway.

Verses 18-20

Probably represent examples of further capital punishment rather than exhaustive categories. Practicing occult magical arts (“do not allow a sorceress to live”), bestiality (“anyone who has sexual relations with an animal ...”), and polytheism (“whoever sacrifices to any god other than the LORD ...) represent very different topics brought together to suggest a wide panorama of criminal acts that could not be tolerated by the covenant community. The problem with these practices is not merely the abhorrent departure from decency they represent; their greater offense is in their attempt to substitute something in the place of the saving practices of Yahweh's covenant. Any other crime which undermined the covenant could be treated likewise.

Verses 21-27

You must love your neighbour. Again the categories listed are not intended to be exhaustive, they are just indicative of vulnerable groups which are likely to be mistreated. There was no government welfare system, charity was the responsibility of the community.

The Israelites lived in Egypt for over four centuries without the rights accorded to citizens, but they were certainly not *strangers* to Egypt. Because every member of the Israelite nation hearing these words for the first time had been in the situation of aliens in Egypt only months prior, it might be assumed that they would all automatically loathe any form of discrimination against aliens and would seek naturally to avoid the sorts of practices of which they themselves had painfully been victims. The law assumes nothing of the sort. Knowing human nature, God explicitly warned his people not to do what might have come naturally for them—seeking to enjoy the experience of lording it over someone else for once. Discrimination against noncitizens was so common in the ancient world, and the tendency to hypocrisy so natural for human beings, that Israel had to be warned against both at once in this law. They could not rightly engage in what they so roundly condemned when it was done to them, and they could not fall into the easy patterns of the culture of which they were a part, but they had to break with temptation and tradition and act differently from others if they were to be Yahweh's holy covenant people.

Verses 23-26 warn against social injustice. Lending money at interest to fellow Israelites was prohibited.

Verses 28-31

Require respect for God's holiness. God's people were not to curse their legitimate (God appointed) rulers. Verses 29 and 30 require tithing and the firstborn offering. Only firstborn of animals suitable for eating (e.g. lambs and goats) were actually slaughtered. The rest (including humans) were redeemed by the payment of a price

Chapter 23

Verses 1-3

These are really an expansion of the ninth commandment not to bear false witness.

In verse 2 a better translation is majority. Verse 3 is interesting – we mustn't favour anyone either rich or poor.

Verses 4-5

We mustn't fall to the temptation not to help because it would favour our enemy. Love your neighbour as yourself. This is not just limited to donkeys and oxen. If one is required to help even those who have made themselves one's enemy, surely one would be required to help those who were more neutral on the scale of hostility, such as complete strangers or people who might merely be regarded as lazy in their care of their animals or the like. And, of course, friends and family and actual neighbors would be included as well. Cf the parable of the Good (or Compassionate) Samaritan.

Verses 6-9

Essentially repeat verse 3 with different language. We must have absolute integrity in legal matters. Do not put an innocent person to death – capital punishment was involved in many legal proceedings, so bearing false witness could easily cause the death of an innocent person.

Paul reminded his readers that there is no action, no matter how evil, that people will resist doing if the financial reward is large enough (1 Timothy 6:10). Dismissing a lawsuit that actually has merit, rendering a guilty or innocent verdict when the opposite is actually reasonable, bringing a case against someone in order to harass rather than obtain justice are those things that have been and are being done in many places around the world on the basis of bribes. The power of a bribe to make someone ignore evidence is here compared to the causation of blindness, and to speak a lie is here compared to a speech defect making it impossible for one to say what he wants to and should say. Bribery in effect cripples the normal, proper way of doing things and substitutes a perverted way. Even the person who normally can "see" (v. 8) matters clearly and who is normally "righteous" in all that he says may change dramatically under the power of a bribe.

Note here the general language of the command: it does not limit itself to court cases. Anyone who requires or accepts an extra, personal payment for his services in any area of society has been "bought" and will not act with proper neutrality and consistency.

Verses 10-12

Verses 10-11 give us two 6/7 year laws for crops and fields. Verse 12 repeats the Sabbath law and gives us its purpose – refreshment.

When Jesus said, "The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath" (Mark 2:27), he summarized the point of these two laws, as well as others relating to the Sabbath. Both of them emphasize that the Sabbath, whether of years or days, was intended by God to provide restoration and well-being for God's people, not merely a cessation of all activity. This perspective is often missed by strict Sabbatarians in modern times, just as in ancient, who stress doing nothing rather than doing what is relaxing and engaging in the least possible physical activity over doing things that produce refreshment and restoration.

Verses 10-11 cover all productive land use without limit to type of crop. Here Israel learned that their farming practices must include a regular pattern of noncultivation. The purpose of such a practice every seventh year of letting the land lie fallow centered on the way such a routine helped the poor and wildlife. Presumably this was staggered – the law doesn't command a complete stoppage all at the same time. The law on the Jubilee Year, which was to be celebrated every fifty years in Israel, clearly demanded full, nationwide compliance at the same time by all persons throughout Israel. In Lev 25:8–55 the statement of the Jubilee law follows with specificity as to uniform, same-time compliance. It seems that the law does

not call for any cessation of animal farming every seven years, which would be tantamount to allowing most cattle and flocks to die if it were actually carried out. Under the system envisioned in this law, poor people and wild animals would always have uncultivated fields in any given area in which to forage/harvest the spontaneous crop because farmers would always be rotating fields, vineyards, and groves in and out of cultivation.

Note also that this law and the one that immediately follows it assume that the Israelites—forced laborers and small cattle farmers in Egypt—would be able to possess and farm the land of Canaan once they conquered it. Accordingly, the law implicitly promises them a fulfillment of God’s plan originally announced to Abraham in Gen 12 and 15.

Verse 13

A repeated command to keep the covenant and to be completely faithful to Yahweh.

Verses 14-19

Govern three annual festivals and their purpose. Thus all Israelite families were to gather three times a year (v. 14) in a single place (v. 17) and all together participate in festivals that had as their primary purpose worship, the adoration and praise of the true God. The three festivals are identified and described briefly in vv. 14–16; specific instructions of what to do and not to do in connection with such festivals are then delineated in vv. 17–19.

All the festivals are to be focused on Yahweh and are not to just be general or harvest festivals.

The first festival is the feast of unleavened bread. The festival commemorated a real historical event, with the purpose of keeping its memory, and therefore its message, alive throughout the generations of God’s people. The concluding command, “No one is to appear before me empty-handed,” states in a very slightly euphemistic, but absolutely unmistakable, manner that the festival involved giving an offering to Yahweh. Not only would the worshipers eat specially during the week of the feast (“for seven days eat bread made without yeast”) but they also would bring food to be dedicated to Yahweh and, by implication, partly eaten by the worshipers in his presence.²⁴⁶ For the full background to the present command, see comments on 11:1–13:10. Passover coincided with the first grain harvest, that is, the barley harvest, being held immediately after it when otherwise the crop farming chores were minimal.

The second festival is the feast of harvest or the feast of weeks – Pentecost. This was 7 weeks – 50 days – after Passover.

The third festival is the feast of ingathering or the feast of booths or tabernacles five days after the day of atonement.

Verses 18 and 19 are universal commands for all sacrifices.

The prohibition “Do not cook a young goat in its mother’s milk” occurs three times in the Pentateuchal law (also in 34:26 and Deut 14:21). Canaanite fertility religion imitated the fertility practices generally found throughout the ancient world. These included “marrying” seeds when planting a field (Lev 19:19; Deut 22:9) on the theory that such a ritual would magically stimulate the powers of nature to procreate, producing more fertile crops. Since mother’s milk (the milk of the goat doe) was what made the goat kids grow big and strong,

the folk theory developed that doe's milk employed in the process of a sacrifice (in this case by boiling rather than by roasting on an altar)²⁵⁹ would somehow impart strength to the goat flock, making the whole flock more fertile. Such nonsense, if believed, could have led the Israelites to conclude that the power to shape their destiny and to live the abundant life was to be found in magical practices and fertility religion rather than in the only true, alive God. Even if all other people groups known to them practiced these sorts of rituals, the Israelites could not. As Yahweh's people, they were to be above such things, attributing all life to the single Source thereof.

Verses 20-31

Confirm the covenant – God's Law brings blessings if it's kept. God says he's going to guide them and help them but they must obey. God will help eliminate their enemies in the Promised land – predominantly the dominant Canaanite group.

Yahweh knows that foreign gods are likely to contaminate his people and he warns them. When Israel would arrive in the promised land, the temptation to plant as the Canaanites planted, to cultivate as they cultivated, to harvest as they harvested, and to worship as they worshiped would be almost irresistible since all these were thought to go together as part and parcel of farming in any given locality.

In verse 33 we have a small but informative part of the evidence for the Mosaic dating of the book of Exodus. If the book were a late (e.g., exilic or postexilic "P" source) fabrication intended to justify laws actually initiated first by Ezra, Nehemiah, or their ilk, it would surely describe ways to make accommodation with the local inhabitants of the land of Canaan. Instead, it demands something that actually did not happen (by reason of Israel's rebellion against God): extermination in holy war of the native population of Canaan as a punishment for the sinfulness of that culture (see above). The command here given anticipates a Canaan populated only by Israelites and those they brought by choice into the land (resident alien traders and workers, but not Canaanites). In reality, most of the local Canaanite population remained alive and well throughout the Israelite occupation of the land because the command given here was never adequately carried out. The discontinuity between what the law expected and what subsequently transpired argues against its after-the-fact fabrication in the postexilic period. The theory that such laws read back into Israel's earlier history the conditions and expectations of the postexilic period is contradicted by the facts in this case.

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Chapter 24

Verses 1-2

Moses is invited up Mt Sinai yet again to ratify the covenant code. Aaron and his two oldest sons and 70 elders were allowed to be a part of the ratification meal party, but weren't allowed to approach God.

In these times covenants were normally concluded with a covenant meal in which animals were symbolically cut in half and the parties to the covenant passed between them – see Genesis 15.

Verses 3-7

Moses repeated the rules of the covenant to the people and they agreed to keep them. Verse 4 says Moses wrote it down – again evidence for Mosaic authorship. Moses then worshipped the Lord and again read the covenant rules to the people and they again agreed to them. They agreed to “everything” – you can't agree to part of a covenant.

Verse 8

Moses sprinkles the people with blood to symbolize their being parties to the covenant.

Verses 9-11

74 people went up for the covenant meal. They were allowed to see God but not clearly.

Verse 12

God invites Moses up the mountain and says he'll give him the Law on tablets of stone. The implication is that Moses will be gone for some time.

Verses 13-14

The arrangements for government in Moses absence make it clear he'll be gone a long time.

Verses 15-18

The cloud that covered the top of Mount Sinai and represented God's glory was similar to that which appeared during the daytime to be a pillar of dark cloud and during the night to be a pillar of fire as described in 13:21–22; 14:19–20, 24. The cloud had already served as a protection and guide for the Israelites in their flight from the Egyptians. It was the same cloud previously indicated in 19:18. In Exodus as elsewhere in the Bible it represented God's glorious presence: awesome, multifaceted, partly mysterious but also protective and encompassing.

“Forty days and forty nights” (v. 18) may not be intended as a literal description of the time Moses was on the mountain. “Forty” has an idiomatic usage in Hebrew, conveying the same sense that “dozens” or “a great many” can convey in English. Sometimes it is used literally to mean “forty” (one more than thirty-nine), but other times its more general meaning is apparent, as probably in the flood story (Gen 7:4, 12, 17; 8:6) or in the account of the scouting of the promised land in Num 13 (esp. 13:25) or other contexts (Judg 13:1; 1 Sam 4:18; 17:16). Could Moses have carried provisions with him that would have kept that long? Not easily, but the reader should suspect that he was fasting the entire time, as confirmed by Deut 9:9.

Chapter 25

Verses 1-9

God now asks for an offering from the Israelites to show that they value him – he’s requiring them to pay attention to proper worship.

Worship is the first, most basic response of a true believer to the true God. It should begin immediately upon conversion, continue with regularity and consistency throughout the rest of life, and will be continued forever in heaven. It is clear from the Scripture that God enjoys being worshiped and expects his people to find joy in worshiping him as well. Worship should bring pleasure and benefit both to the worshiper and to the true, divine object of his or her worship.

In the Old Covenant everything associated with worship had to partake of proper symbolism, so that the presence of God, the purity of God, the superiority of God, and the nature of his salvation could be communicated visually and, at least sometimes, even tactilely, to his people. The tabernacle, its furnishings and implements, and those who facilitated worship were expected to reflect the only intelligent God in his covenant relationship to his specially chosen people.

Preparations for worship must begin at the beginning, with a place to gather and the kinds of things that will represent Yahweh’s covenant presence among his people. The very first step of all this requires the assembling of materials out of which the worship accoutrements can be constructed. But where to find everything since the Israelites were camped in the wilderness of Sinai, far from any civilization?

Some materials, mainly wood, were available in the vicinity—most notably acacia wood, from the acacia trees that grow so abundantly and hardily in both Africa and Asia Minor and specifically the Sinai peninsula. Even so, the harvesting and rough shaping of the wood would have to be done by individuals in preparation for their donating it as requested in v. 5. Other materials would have been found already in the possession of the people themselves. Thus was the appropriateness of a general call to all willing Israelites to surrender some of their valuables, most of which they had taken as spoil from the Egyptians a few months earlier, so that out of these items and what they found locally could be made the tabernacle and its furnishings.

This passage speaks of the need for voluntary contributions, setting a pattern for worship that has always characterized biblical religion. Although God himself could provide anything ever needed for his purposes, including his worship, he delegated to his people the opportunity to do so and thereby gave to them the gift of experiencing generosity and self-sacrifice, as well as a sense of direct involvement in their essential ongoing relationship with him.

Verse 8 could be better translated they will make me a holy place and verse 9 tells us that God had a plan for this holy place. It was to be a shadow copy of what is in heaven.

Verses 10-22

Govern the construction and use of the Ark. This would symbolize God’s presence amongst his people and so it’s described first as the most important element of the tabernacle.

The ark/chest was to measure two and a half cubits by one and a half by one and a half cubits. A cubit was the distance from the tip of a man’s middle finger to the end of his elbow when his hand was held flat and straight in the plane of his forearm, that is, about eighteen inches.

Not very large in size, its impressiveness was to be found in its appearance—an object so large made of pure gold façade (all the surfaces were gold overlaid or solid gold) would surely have been stunning to the eye. The overall structure, including the carrying poles, was acacia wood, the strong, enduring, easily worked wood abundant in the Sinai and so many other parts of the ancient Near East.

Verse 11 emphasizes the importance of having all visible surfaces, inside and out, gilded. In addition there must be a gold trim (“molding”) at the edges so that the ark was not merely a plain box but something more elegant.

The ark symbolized God’s presence, his purity, his superiority, and his covenant blessing. Anything that damaged, or even threatened potentially to damage the ark, however slightly, was in itself a sort of symbolic threat to these important divine realities. The Israelites were to respect the symbols of the realities as a way of showing respect for the realities themselves. A comparable New Covenant requirement of respect in connection with a symbol of a reality applies in the case of the Lord’s Supper. The supper itself is only a symbol of a reality, but disrespect for the symbol leads to serious consequences (1 Cor 11:20–34).

Verse 16 tells us that the Ark was a container. Although it had powerful symbolic value, the ark also had functional value. It was a container, a chest (the meaning of *ārōn*) to hold something very important, “the Testimony” (NRSV “covenant”), that is, the tablets of the Ten Words/Commandments. The Hebrew word translated “Testimony” by the NIV can also mean “decree” or “command” or “[collection of] decrees/commands” since it is used often as a collective noun. A case can be made for the NIV translation since the tablets were in fact a witness/testimony to the covenant, a relationship that the tablets described in writing. The NRSV translation “covenant” can also be defended because the tablets were the written version of the covenant, the visible “covenant” document. Regardless of which translation is preferred, the tablets were a means of preserving in writing the formative terms of a covenant that was itself not merely a piece of writing but a reality that the writing described. In saying “which I will give you” (see also v. 21), God predicted that he himself would initially take care of fulfilling the document clause responsibility of his covenant.

Verses 23-30

Construction of the Table. Furniture makes it clear that this is God’s dwelling place amongst his people. Like the Ark the table is rectangular overlaid with gold. Like the Ark the table had rings which enabled it to be carried without touching to preserve its sacredness. The table was smaller than the Ark. The instructions aren’t completely precise, perhaps Bezalel (the constructor – Exodus 31) was given freedom to express his own inclinations and ideas. The table was to be equipped with plates and dishes of gold.

Verses 31-40

Specify the construction of a floor standing lampstand. Yahweh’s house needed to be lit on a grander scale than ordinary dwellings. Verses 37-40 specify the accessories for the lampstand. Even the wick trimmers were to be gold. Verse 40 implies that God had given Moses more complete patterns and instructions than are described here.

Chapter 26

Describes the construction of the Tabernacle.

The Hebrew word for tabernacle is *miškān*, which means in Hebrew “living place” or “dwelling place.” The tabernacle was a fancy rectangular tent in which God lived symbolically in the presence of his people. After being built, it was set up in the middle of the entire Israelite encampment so that all the individual small, simple Israelite tents surrounded the one big fancy tent of Yahweh in concentric circles. When he led them in traveling or in going into war, he went out in front of them in the form of his angel or the pillar of cloud/fire. But when they encamped, his home was in their very midst, and they gathered their homes around his.

His dwelling place faced east and had two rooms. The east room was an outer room or entrance room called the holy place that was thirty feet (twenty cubits) long, fifteen feet (ten cubits) wide, and fifteen (ten cubits) feet high. In it were three pieces of furniture: a food/utensil table, a lampstand, and an incense altar. On the west was an inner or “back room” called the most holy place that was dimensionally a cube: fifteen feet (ten cubits) long, fifteen feet (ten cubits) wide, and fifteen feet (ten cubits) high. In it was the ark of the covenant—an ornate box with a special platform on its lid that symbolized God’s presence. This room was divided from the outer room by a special woven curtain of blue, red, and gold with cherubim motifs.

The tabernacle was made of three layers of fabric that were spread, stretched, and/or hung over a framework resembling interconnected ladders made of gilded wood. The inner layer (the layer visible to anyone inside) was, similarly to the curtain mentioned above, also a beautiful curtain cloth elaborately woven of blue, red, and gold colors with cherubim motifs patterned into the weaving. Over that was a middle layer of goat hair, giving thickness and protection. The outer layer was of dugong (sea cow) hides, providing a waterproof side to the elements. Only priests, specially prepared by rituals, could enter the tabernacle itself. The other Israelites had to remain in the courtyard to worship.

The tabernacle was located at the western end of a rectangular courtyard that was made of linen curtains seven and one-half feet high, hung from poles, going all around to form the boundary. The courtyard was one hundred and fifty feet (one hundred cubits) long and seventy-five feet (fifty cubits) wide, with a thirty foot (twenty cubits) wide entrance on the eastern end that usually was open but had a curtain of blue, purple, and scarlet that could be used to close off the courtyard entirely. In the eastern end of the courtyard stood two items: an altar for grilling sacrificial meat and a laver for the priests to wash up before entering the tabernacle.

Understandably, such an important symbolic structure was referred to by more than one term in the original. The most common is *miškān*, “dwelling place.” But others are used, including *miškān Yahweh* (“Yahweh’s dwelling place”; e.g., 25:9), or *miškān hā’ēdūt* (“the Testimony’s dwelling place,” e.g., 38:21, so called because the tabernacle housed the ark that held the Ten Words/Commandments, which were the “testimony” to the whole covenant), and *miškān ’ōhel mō’ēd* (“the dwelling place that is the Tent of Meeting,” e.g., 39:32, referring to the way the tabernacle replaced the earlier “Tent of Meeting”), or simply *’ōhel mō’rēd* (“Tent of Meeting,” e.g., 28:43), or *bēt yahweh* (“Yahweh’s house,” as in 34:26), or *qōdeš* (“Holy Place/Sanctuary,” e.g., 38:24), or *miqdāš* (“Holy Place/Sanctuary” as in 25:8).

Everything making up the tabernacle and its courtyard could be rather quickly disassembled, wrapped or bundled up, and transported as the Israelites moved from place to place before settling in Canaan. It also could be reassembled rather quickly whenever they set up camp.

Thus as the Israelites moved, God moved with them. Wherever they went, he lived in their midst.

Worshippers could look into the tabernacle from the courtyard as they brought their sacrifices to Yahweh and might have been able to see at a distance something of the beautiful workmanship and color of the inner curtains. From the outside, however, the inner curtains were invisible. Of course, the middle layer of curtains also buffered the more delicate inner curtains from the heavier outer layer of hides as well.

God maintained his invisible nature because the Ark and its contents were invisible from view at all times. Under the Old covenant God wanted his people to have faith in him and trust him just as he does under the new covenant. The New Covenant believer knows by faith that Jesus lived among us, died on the cross for the remission of our sins, and was resurrected to glory thereafter. But no modern person saw any of it, and no pictures exist. All we have is the written report. It was the same for the Old Covenant saints. They had the oral and then written report about the ark and its contents, but they could not see either the ark or the contents. By faith they believed that there was an ark behind that curtain in the tabernacle, and by faith they believed that the Ten Commandments and other objects were inside that ark. This pleased God, who has always delighted in being trusted and who has in fact always *required* that he be trusted for his benefits to be known.

Chapter 27

Verses 1-8

Deal with the construction of the altar. In various ways during Old Covenant times, God taught his people the basic principle of salvation from sin: *something that God considers a substitute must die in my place so that I may live*. Altar sacrifice was the primary way for this substitution to happen. In preparation for Christ's death on the cross, which was the ultimate sacrifice to which all others pointed, animal sacrifice was required of all Israelites. Since it is dangerous to eat raw animal meat, God required that it be cooked, and to accomplish this a large outdoor grill was required. By killing an animal, then cooking it on that grill in God's presence (i.e., in front of the entrance to the tabernacle), and then eating it in God's presence (symbolically sharing the meal with him), the Israelite worshiper learned over and over again the concept of substitutionary atonement and of covenant renewal. The sacrificial meal always included a portion of a formerly living thing (sacrificial animal) that had been put to death in the place of the worshiper. It was prepared and cooked at God's house (the courtyard of the tabernacle, on the altar described in this passage) in God's presence, and it renewed the worshiper's commitment to his or her covenant with Yahweh each time it was eaten.

Verse 8 indicates that the altar was to be as lightweight as possible for transportability.

Verses 7-19

Govern the courtyard for the tabernacle.

In ancient Israel one worshiped *at* Yahweh's house, but not *in* Yahweh's house. People who live in tents do not cook inside but outside, and they typically eat their meals outside as well. Since the tabernacle was a tent, a portable home for Yahweh, it is only logical that he would expect his invited guests (Israelite worshipers) to join him at but not in his tent-home. His personal servants (the priests) might enter his home and come and go from it for certain purposes, but all others met with him outdoors. To make a special area for worship, God insisted that his tabernacle have a courtyard within which worship would take place. The area outside the courtyard would simply constitute normal space like any other in the Israelite encampment, but inside would constitute holy ground.

The courtyard would need to be large enough to accommodate hundreds of worshipers at a time as well as the priests who served Yahweh on their behalf and the animals that were being prepared or cooked and, of course, the tabernacle itself. Since worshipers ate their portion of sacrificial meals “in Yahweh’s presence,” which means in the tabernacle (and later temple) courtyard, there was a constant stream of people during times of sacrifice entering the courtyard, watching their sacrifice prepared, receiving it from the priests, sitting and eating as households, and then departing for their own homes. But the courtyard would also need to be small enough and made of lightweight and portable materials so that it could be easily broken down for transportation yet rapidly set up for use as a worship center once the Israelites, following Yahweh’s lead through the pillar of cloud/fire, encamped at a given location.

Verses 20-21

Cover the requirements that the lamps be kept lit because Yahweh needed the courtesy of light.

Chapter 28

Sets out the rules for priestly clothing. Verse 1 represents yet another way in which God taught the Israelites about the inherited nature of the priesthood: “Aaron your brother” (i.e., the Aaron who is part of your family and therefore one of the Levites) and “his sons” (i.e., his heirs)⁴⁰² must be brought to Moses for proper investiture, “so they may serve me as priests.” Thus God declared the priesthood an office that is passed down from generation to generation within a family that is within a tribe of Israel—not an office that can be purchased (cf. 2 Chr 13:9–10) or taken by reason of power or influence (2 Chr 26:16–21) or by popular election or any other means. Only God could make someone a priest; it was not a human choice.

Vestments signified authority in the ancient world. In the absence of a monarchy in Israel, these vestments made the high priest the leader of the people. Evidence of a specially vested high priest as leader of Israel appears in many places in Israel’s history, including the restoration after the Babylonian captivity (Zech 3:5–7) as well as the organization of the Jewish people in New Testament times (Matt 26:65). Because Israel was begun as a theocracy rather than a monarchy, the sort of vestments that conferred dignity and authority that a king might have worn in other cultures were worn by God’s high priest in Israel as a way of confirming the high priest’s role as representative of Yahweh for purposes of worship.

Chapter 29

Governs consecration of priests. This chapter prescribes the regulations for proper consecration/ordination of priests in Israel from the time of Moses onward (vv. 1–37), as well as the permanent daily consecration offering for the tabernacle (vv. 38–43). Properly consecrated/ordained priests serving at a properly consecrated house of God would help provide for the presence and blessing of God (vv. 44–46).

The consecration/ordination ceremony described in vv. 1–37 had a total of six steps, three of which were washing, clothing, and anointing the priests, and the other three of which involved preparation and execution of sacrifices. The washing ritual (v. 4) and the first two sacrifices (the bread/cakes/wafers offering of vv. 2–3, 23–25 accompany the first two actual sacrifices, that of the bull and the first ram, vv. 10–18) are not particularly unique to priestly consecrations/ordinations and must be considered as functioning to prepare for the ordination

and make everything holy. The actual ordination/consecration involves the unique three steps of clothing the priests, anointing them, and specially offering an ordination ram as a sacrifice.

Verses 10-14 The sacrifice of the bull here appears to have constituted a sort of preparatory “sin offering,” designed to atone for any unforgiven sin the priests may have previously committed and, as it were, brought with them into their ordination ceremony, as well as any uncleanness or holiness that might have somehow defiled the altar of the tabernacle. The instruction “Aaron and his sons shall lay their hands on its head” (v. 10) provides a symbolic means of transferring their guilt to the body of the animal. They could not actually do this transferring but rather were symbolically acceding to the basic principle of sacrifice: something must die in my place if I am to live—here specifically focused on “living” in the manner of a holy priest acceptable to God.

The bull having been slaughtered “in the LORD’s presence” (inside the tabernacle enclosure, at least generally before the front curtain of the tabernacle, so as to be “at the entrance to the Tent of Meeting,” v. 11), its blood was used to “cleanse” the altar’s horns and otherwise poured out at the altar’s base, but not with a sense of *inclusio* (as if applying blood to the top and the bottom of the entire altar would “cleanse” the whole). Rather, the rest of the altar would be cleansed by the blood of the first ram (v. 16), yet to be sacrificed.

Verses 15-18 Again the priests lay their hands on an animal to symbolize the transference of sin from them to it before it was killed (v. 15). Already a bull had been sacrificed, but only its blood and some fat portions had been employed in a sin-atoning ritual (vv. 10–14). This time the first of the two rams was used, and all of it would be burned on the altar except for its blood, which was sprinkled on the altar on all sides. The blood of the bull was applied to the horns and base of the altar (v. 12), and the rest of the altar was ritually cleansed through the sprinkling of the sacrificial animal’s blood on its sides, which were previously not touched by the blood (v. 16). This ram was cut in pieces and its inner parts cleansed of offal and blood by washing (v. 17) so that it constituted properly prepared symbolic “food” for Yahweh. In most sacrifices parts of the animal were thrown away, parts were offered to Yahweh by burning to ashes on the altar, and the rest were cooked and eaten by the worshipers and priests, who each got a share. In this case the entire animal was offered to Yahweh by being burnt to ashes, so all the parts were placed on the altar, and nothing was thrown away or kept by the worshipers or priests (v. 18).

In the prior two instances of using blood from a sacrificial animal—the bull and the first ram—the blood was employed for ritual cleansing from sin, applied to the altar and its surrounding ground. Its purpose was to cleanse the *place* and the *process*, but not yet the *persons*. Now, however, the blood of the second ram, the ordination ram (see v. 22), was applied to “Aaron and his sons,” that is, to the priests. First, the priests to be ordained lay their hands on the ram, once again to transfer their sins from it as they gave it over to Yahweh (v. 19). Then, having properly slaughtered it, the high priest (Moses as the officiant in this initial instance but later whoever was high priest) took some blood collected in the process of slaughter and touched it to the right earlobe, right thumb, and right big toe⁴⁴⁷ of each priest being ordained. There was no desire in this ceremony to make the priest all bloody but merely to apply to him a small token of the blood of atonement (v. 20) on exposed flesh at the top, middle,⁴⁴⁹ and bottom of his body, suggesting by that distribution that the blood carried out its symbolic function on his entire person.⁴⁵¹ That which remained of the blood after its

application to the extremities of the priests the officiant must then “sprinkle ... against the altar on all sides.”

What happened next (v. 21) had yet another symbolism attached to it. Moses retrieved some of the blood that was already applied “against the altar” (v. 20), meaning on its sides (vv. 16, 20) and/or its horns (v. 12), mixed it into the anointing oil (a compounded oil that will be described in detail in 30:23–32), and sprinkled that on the priests, with the result that in consequence of all of the process—not just the anointing—“he and his sons and their garments will be consecrated.” The text does not state explicitly that the blood taken from the altar was mixed with the special anointing oil, but such a conclusion follows from the facts of the situation. The amount of blood available from the altar would be very small since the smooth bronze metallic surface on the sides and horns (the grill top was not sprinkled or touched with blood) would contain just token amounts of blood—so little that it would be a matter mainly of dabbing at the bits of blood residue after virtually all of it had simply run down the sides onto the ground. What few grams (or more likely milligrams) of blood would be salvaged from the altar in this way would then under no conditions be enough to sprinkle the priests and their clothing. Only by mixing of the tiny bit of blood into the ample supply of anointing oil would Moses or the successive officiant high priests have had enough liquid for the blood actually to reach the bodies and clothing of the priests being ordained.

But blood there must be, no matter how small and token the amount. Why? Because it is the death of Christ that qualifies his servants to be holy enough to enter into the work of his ministry because that death can be signified only by blood, not oil, and because all Old Testament sacrifices point to the ultimate sacrifice of Christ, the sacrifice that actually provides the atonement, to which all other previous sacrifices look for their derived validity. In the logic of the Old Testament’s revealed sacrificial system, oil helps signify purity and cleanness, but not forgiveness. The combination of the oil and the blood signify purity of service and forgiveness of sin respectively. Purity and forgiveness made the priests acceptable to God—“consecrated,” meaning “holy.”

Verses 36-37 govern consecrating the altar – they’re no part of the ordination ritual.

Verses 38-43 deal with regular daily offerings.

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Verses 43-46 deal with the promise of God’s regular presence amongst his people.

Chapter 30

Verses 1-10

Deal with the construction of an incense altar.

31:18

It’s probable that both tablets contained the full, text of the 10 commandments – that’s how covenant treaties were done in those times. There were two copies one for each side. Both were placed in the Ark of the Covenant – but that was where God lived emphasizing this as a point of contact between men and God.

Chapter 32

Chapters 32-34 deal with (i) rebellion, (ii) renewal of the covenant and (iii) fulfillment of the tabernacle instructions. No sooner had the covenant been made than Israel broke it:

Verses 1-6

This is hymned in Psalm 106:19-23. Moses long absence – he’d been gone 40 days – added to their lack of commitment to Yahweh’s rigorous anti-idolatry rules.

Moreover, the people had not been told how long Moses would be gone. Exodus 24:18 indicates for the reader that Moses ended up staying on the mountain for forty days, but nothing there or elsewhere in the narrative indicates that either he or any other Israelite knew in advance how long he would be gone. Not only so, but Aaron had specifically been left in charge (24:14). The fact that the people of Israel would turn to Aaron for help in returning to idolatry can hardly be surprising. He was already designated as their leader pro tempore and in light of the length of Moses' absence would have seemed to many the logical choice to be their new permanent leader.

Verse 1 probably means that the people gathered around Aaron in hostility. Aaron caved in to the pressure. But I don't think they were making images of other gods here – they were breaking the second commandment by making an image of Yahweh to go before them.

All of Israel's neighbours used images and idols in worship, but here the Israelites were commanded to be distinct from them. As distinctive as Yahweh is from pagan gods. This distinctiveness was both external and conceptual. Externally, the Israelites had no physical objects which were worshipped, and internally they also had a completely different idea of their religion. Yahweh was immanent (or present) in the world, but he was not confined to the world. He was and is transcendent (beyond the limits of the world). That transcendence was preserved in this commandment. The Israelites had no image of Yahweh to worship. Can you see why God is so passionate about this? No humanly designed image can capture what God is like, it misleads us.

We need to remember that whenever God revealed himself to the Israelites he never gave himself a concrete form. He appeared to Moses through a burning bush and accompanied the Israelites after the Exodus as a pillar of fire or cloud.

Now you'd think the second commandment was easy to keep wouldn't you. Yet the Israelites broke it time and time again, indeed as we're reading they broke it almost immediately after receiving the commandments. Let me just read you part of the story from Exodus chapter 32:

"He [Aaron] took what they handed him and made it into an idol cast in the shape of a calf, fashioning it with a tool. Then they said, "These are your gods, O Israel, who brought you up out of Egypt." When Aaron saw this, he built an altar in front of the calf and announced, "Tomorrow there will be a festival to the LORD." So the next day the people rose early and sacrificed burnt offerings and presented fellowship offerings. Afterwards they sat down to eat and drink and got up to indulge in revelry." (Exodus 32:4-6 NIV)

Now the NIV translation I quoted renders v4 as "gods" in the plural, but the Hebrew could be read either as the plural "gods" or the singular "god". The Hebrew could go either way because it uses the word *elohim* here, which can be translated as singular or plural, depending on the context. Many English language versions of the Bible use the plural because the pronoun in verse 4 is plural. To be fair to the NIV it does make a margin note of the alternative possibility. But since Aaron only makes one idol, since he identifies this idol with the God who had just brought them out of Egypt, and since he identifies the golden calf with the Hebrew name Yahweh in v5, I take v4 to be talking about one god, not many gods (Sarna 224 n. 138). This is also how the New American Standard Bible renders this verse, as do most Jewish translations of the Old Testament. I think Aaron was presenting the bull calf as a representation of Yahweh, indeed he may have thought it was an appropriate image for Yahweh because a bull calf symbolised strength and power – although there were other less appropriate aspects to its symbolism apart from the breach of the second commandment.

So the incident with the golden calf doesn't violate the first commandment - the Israelites had the right God, Yahweh - but it violates the second commandment - they tried to worship the right God in the wrong way.

The reference to Moses who brought them up out of Egypt is putting Yahweh down – it was Yahweh who did it not Moses. When the people said they didn't know what had happened to Moses they were also demonstrating a lack of faith.

The statement that “they all took off their earrings” doesn't mean that everyone was complicit in the idolatry – it might be better translated “all sorts of”. Aaron may not have carved the golden calf the Hebrew could also be translated as cast it in a mould – but actually it was probably wood with a gold overlay as we shall see later.

In verse 6 the people imitated pagan idol worship and followed up with revelry.

Verses 7-14

God was angry and Moses interceded. In verse 7 the Israelites have done something so wrong that it constituted acting corruptly. The NIV translation “[the people] have become corrupt” is doubtful. Such a meaning is possible for the verb in question here, *š/h*, if it were used in the *niphal* (e.g., Gen 6:11; 8:20), but the *piel*, the verb stem actually employed here, has more the meaning “to ruin, to act ruinously, to do a corrupt thing.” In other words, God was not saying to Moses that the Israelites were no longer capable of doing good (i.e., had become corrupt in the sense of being spoiled/polluted or the like) but that they had done something so wrong that it constituted acting corruptly. Thus, for example, the NRSV “have acted perversely” or the HCSB “have acted corruptly” more nearly capture the sense that the situation, while very serious, was not one of no hope whatever for Israel's redemption.

In verse 8 God is making it clear to Moses that the Israelites have broken the second commandment. God himself had chosen his ways of personal manifestation in the past (fire, smoke, pillar, overpowering voice), the people's choice of a dumb idol who could do none of these things over the living God was also a rejection of his methods of demonstrating his presence. What they could see and touch at their convenience was what they wanted—a god who would let them live as they wished and have a good time when they wanted to and who would not impose his covenant requirements on them. Theirs was a foolish choice reflecting badly on any people so self-absorbed and self-destructive as to make it. A vigorous young bull seemed to the Egyptians an appropriate way to represent a truly powerful god. In other words, by their actions Aaron and the people showed themselves still to be “Egyptian Israelites” rather than “Yahweh's Israelites.”

In verses 9-10, For God to announce to a prophet (Moses being the paradigm for all future prophets) his intention to do something as a way of inviting intercession has many parallels, the most famous perhaps being those of Amos 7:1–6, where God showed Amos things he was planning to do by way of judgment upon Israel and then, in response to Amos' intercession, relented. In that context he was clearly inviting Amos to intercede so that he (God) might relent. A similarly prominent example is found in Jonah's required announcement that Nineveh would be destroyed in “forty days” (Jonah 3:4), a message Jonah reluctantly gave because he knew that it represented an invitation to repent and not an irreversible condemnation.

Verses 11-14. Much to his credit, Moses revealed no desire to replace Abraham and no interest in easing his own problems by seeing the recalcitrant Israelites obliterated. Indeed, as the reader will learn in v. 32, Moses was willing to offer the loss of his eternal life rather than see the nation of Israel eliminated from the earth. He appealed to God (just as God expected him to by inviting him through the rhetorical “leave me alone ...” in v. 10) with three arguments, all of which appealed to God’s character of consistency and faithfulness. The first is: Why should God nullify the result of his demonstration of divine power? (“whom you brought out of Egypt with great power and a mighty hand”). The second is: Why should God grant the Egyptians delight in seeing the Israelites crushed—and by their own God? (“Why should the Egyptians say, ‘It was with evil intent that he brought them out, to kill them in the mountains and to wipe them off the face of the earth’ ”). The third is: Why should God go back on his promises to the patriarchs? (“Remember your servants Abraham, Isaac and Israel, to whom you swore by your own self: ‘I will make your descendants as numerous as the stars in the sky and I will give your descendants all this land I promised them, and it will be their inheritance forever’ ”). This sort of appeal to God appears again, though not in exactly the same form or wording, in Num 14:13–19 (in connection with the rebellion in the wilderness) and in Deut 9:26–29 (a reminder of the present context). Abraham himself had appealed to God’s character and past faithfulness in Gen 18:22–32 on behalf of the city of Sodom.

Of course, God never desired to destroy his people in the first place, so he was willing to relent in response to Moses’ appeal (v. 14). Nevertheless, the threat was genuine rather than theoretical, and the response of God reveals his willingness to respond to prayer. Indeed, this is one of many passages in Scripture that demonstrate God’s responsiveness to the prayer of a righteous person prayed not for selfish reasons but out of a desire to see God’s will accomplished. It is important to remember that Moses here stated that God “relented and did not bring on his people the disaster he had threatened”—which is not at all the same as saying that God agreed to do nothing. What he had threatened was to destroy Israel; what he ended up doing was to punish them with a plague (32:34–35), a lesser punishment but by no means an acquittal.

Verses 15-29

Tell us of Moses’ anger and the Levite punishment on the Israelites. The tablets with the commandments were incredibly precious, but Moses was so frustrated and angry that he broke them. Verse 18 is a terrible translation, the Hebrew doesn’t mention singing it just says it is not the sound of war, neither victory nor defeat. I think Moses’ breaking of the tablets was an important symbolic act – symbolic of the breaking of the covenant. There’s a parallel with Zechariah breaking a staff (Zechariah 11:10).

In verse 20 the idol was probably made of wood with a gold overlay – so it could be burned. Burning, grinding, and scattering were actions commonly employed in the ancient world to get rid of an idol permanently so that it could never be reconstituted from its scavenged elements and be thought again worthy of worship. Thus Josiah did a similar sort of thing with the Asherah idol he removed from the Jerusalem temple (“He took the Asherah pole from the temple of the LORD to the Kidron Valley outside Jerusalem and burned it there. He ground it to powder and scattered the dust over the graves of the common people,” 2 Kgs 23:6) and with the high place idol and altar from Bethel (2 Kgs 23:15; cf. 2 Chr 34:4), and a king of Moab burned the bones of a king of Edom to powder in order to deny him a reconstituted body in the resurrection (Amos 2:1).

Aaron’s response to Moses’ attack on him (verses 22-24) is dishonest and indefensible.

In verses 26-28 God tells Moses to exact punishment on the Israelites. Leaving idolaters in the midst of the community to influence it was not God's plan. Moses positioned himself at the entrance (Hb. "gate" or "gateway") to the camp (on its spatial organization, see Num 2) so as to symbolize standing at the dividing point between Israel and non-Israel and said, "Whoever for Yahweh, to me!" (there is no verb "is" and no verb "come" in the verbless clause of the original). Immediately, all Levites rallied to him. Since Aaron was a Levite and had led the move toward idolatry, it can hardly be doubted that other Levites had also succumbed to its attractions. But now everyone was being given a chance to repent and reestablish loyalty to Yahweh's covenant. All the Levites did so decisively—including, surely, a chagrined and probably openly embarrassed Aaron. Some of the Levites' motivation may have come from tribal loyalty to their fellow tribesman Moses, especially now that they had seen Aaron publicly rebuked and had seen the bull idol so decisively destroyed. But to their credit they all seized the occasion to align themselves with Yahweh and against the idolatry that many of them had so recently embraced.

A parallel situation occurred later, at Baal-Peor, as described in Num 25. There, as Num 25:2 states, the Israelites once again sacrificed to false gods (thus necessarily having built altars for the purpose), ate, and bowed down before those gods (the gods in this case being various manifestations of Baal). What is more explicitly brought to the attention of the reader in Num 25 as opposed to the present passage, however, is that the revelry involved was overtly sexual, as Num 25:1, 6–8 reveals. Again the remedy was the same: death to idolaters. As directed by God (Num 25:5), Moses ordered that "each of you must put to death those of your men who have joined in worshiping the Baal of Peor." The imposition of the death penalty is vividly illustrated by the action of a prominent Levite, Phinehas, who killed a man and woman in the midst of pagan religious prostitutional "revelry" (Num 25:8). As the Num 25 passage makes clear, only those who engaged committedly in idolatry were put to death, not everyone indiscriminately. It was surely the same in the present context.

Verses 30-35

Again Moses makes atonement for their sins and the Israelites are struck with a plague as a final warning against idolatry. Verses 32-33 are very important. In these verses Moses linked his appeal for forgiveness for Israel's sin to an offer to lose his own eternal life if the people's sin could not be forgiven. God replied that he would not give eternal life to sinners, implying both that Moses was not at fault and that he, God, was fully in charge of judging between the righteous and the wicked and would make the determination of who obtained eternal life. Thus "Whoever has sinned against me I will blot out of my book" (v. 33) represents a statement of divine practice, a standard of justice that God maintains—as well as a strict warning that eternal life is not automatic and that a person who tries to enter it without his sins being forgiven could not succeed. Verse 33 is, then, one of the Bible's stronger statements about the absolute necessity for the forgiveness of sins, and therefore, for a savior. It can be regarded as implicitly messianic even if not overtly so.

The idea of the "book of life" was used by Paul who spoke of fellow believers, whose eternal destiny was certain by reason of their having trusted Christ for salvation, "as fellow workers, whose names are in the book of life" (Phil 4:3). In Revelation, John used the term "book of life" six times, once with reference to the possibility (or not) of being blotted out of the Book of life (Rev 3:5) and five times with reference to having one's name found in the Book of Life at the great final judgment of all the earth (Rev 13:8; 17:8; 20:12, 15; 21:27). In other words, if your name is in the Book of Life at the judgment, you will live forever in heaven. If it is not, you will be destroyed in hell—you are not *listed* among the living and cannot therefore live on. It is useful to note that John also called the Book of

Life the “book of life belonging to the Lamb that was slain from the creation of the world” (Rev 13:8) as a way of indicating that it is through Christ alone that eternal life is obtained.

Chapter 33

Verses 1-6

God reiterates his promise to give the Israelites the Promised land. He says he’ll send his angel before them to drive out the people presently in the land and so initiates the idea of Holy War. But this is very different from modern Muslim jihad – it was specific for one time and one place.

The mood of the Israelites in this passage contrasts dramatically with their idolatrous revelry as described in the prior chapter. More importantly, the nature of Yahweh’s presence among them had shifted greatly. The people had shown by their idolatry that they craved a direct and obvious divine presence to lead them in their journeys. Indeed, the golden young bull was to their way of thinking a means of capturing the presence of some gods (gods that represented a distorted understanding of Yahweh), and the people rejoiced finally to be able to see the gods who had been—they thought—helping them on the exodus so far (32:4). Now as part of their punishment for that folly they would have to live with *less* than they had before. Instead of a God who directly communed with Moses and whose presence could be seen on the mountain, they would have to live with a much more elusive representation of God’s presence, an angel, and therefore they realized that they had been demoted from people who dealt with Yahweh directly through Moses to people who now would have an angel added to the chain of command.

God had said bluntly (even if it was only a rhetorical threat he would eventually not carry out) that he himself would not go with them (v. 3), and they now mourned because what they had so craved and had tried to manufacture—direct divine presence—was now even further removed from them than it had been. The rest of the journey would require even more faith, not less, and would be even more frightening because the people would be more on their own than they had been.

In the ancient Near East, mourning tended to involve appearance, not just attitude, so that what one wore was a part of the appearance aspect of mourning. Nothing fancy could adorn a mourner because fancy dress was associated with cheerfulness and might contradict the desired pattern, which was thoroughgoing mourning behavior designed to appeal to a god (or the true God) for relief of suffering (including in this case relief from the unknown miseries that might be subsumed under “and I will decide what to do with you”). Therefore they removed all adornment and made their appearance “plain” as a sign of mourning.

Verses 7-11

In this passage Moses explained to the reader what sort of relationship God established with Israel (and with himself, Moses, and his aide, Joshua) after his announcement that he would no longer accompany them closely. What he so far granted to them was a more distant presence, not an utter abandonment. In contrast to the elaborate tabernacle and its many symbols of the presence of God, the Israelites would now deal (for a time) with a small, simple “meeting tent” (or as tradition words it “tent of meeting”).

The differences and limitations are important. Instead of the community’s being organized around the tabernacle (Num 2), the tent of meeting would reside “outside” the camp. Instead of worshiping at the tabernacle in their midst, the people would worship from afar, from their

homes looking toward the tent of meeting. Instead of a cadre of priests led by Aaron manning the tabernacle, the tent of meeting would be manned by one person, Joshua, so that in the absence of priests and sacrifices, there stood only a non-Levitical assistant, a caretaker.⁹³ God's presence would now be both distant and noncontinuous (v. 10), a diminished presence.

But God's love, protection and care for his people, however mitigated, did not cease. Indeed, he still spoke to individuals, through Moses, in response to special inquiries (v. 7). Verses 8-10 indicate that the people's respect for Moses had fully returned.

Verses 12-23

Speak of the need for and the promise of God's glory. For Moses the presence of God was confirmed again and again—most fully by an actual theophany, an appearance of God in some sort of visible manifestation. We have already argued that what happened in these theophanies was not that Moses actually saw God in the same way believers will see him in heaven but that God manifest himself by producing for Moses' benefit some sort of shape that was visible and therefore gave a sense of closeness and locality to his contact with Moses.

At this point in the story of the exodus, Moses very much needed the reassurance God now proposed to give him. The exodus assignment—to bring the people not just from Egypt to Sinai but now from Sinai to the promised land, was complicated by the vivid evidence of the people's idolatry in chap. 32 that they were a recalcitrant lot, suggesting that Moses' task would not be a light one. Moreover, God's refusal so far to grant his direct presence any longer in accompanying the people means that Moses would, as it were, be more on his own in leading Israel hereafter than he had been before—and the job had proved hard enough already.

The theophany promised here would reassure him. It would strengthen his resolve and build his confidence. His assignment was daunting and his resources few. If he knew, however, that God's glory abode with him and that therefore God's favor and care attended his actions, he could endure and prevail.

Chapter 34

Replacement of the stone tablets and the renewal of the covenant. The replacement of the stone tablets is a mark of God's forgiveness of Israel. But, verse 1 reminds them that the covenant has been broken – I think the very fact that the covenant had to be renewed shows that it could be revoked by God as a bilateral covenant not a simple promise.

Verse 2 most people in the Middle East started a journey in the morning whilst it was cool.

Verse 3. God's holiness is a threat to the unholy, so nothing and no one he does not specifically declare acceptable may safely approach him. Accordingly, to protect his holiness and to protect those who might be struck dead by coming too close to him, he once again issued a warning against people and animals going anywhere on Mount Sinai. The special mention of "flocks and herds" is necessary because Sinai contained grassy grazing areas the people might find irresistible without specific warning.

In verses 5-7 God shows Moses his glory.

Verse 5. The language “came down ... and stood” represents a standard way of describing what otherwise is not easily comprehended by humans, that is, that God manifested himself specially and personally in Moses’ presence. Thereby Moses could perceive that a real personal being had come to him and not just a concept, or a feeling, or a numinous impression. As before, he employed a cloud (not just any but the cloud of his glory) as the visible part of the manifestation.

Verses 6-7. Chapter 33 predicted how Yahweh would pass in front of Moses and this is the fulfillment. The repeating of his name is a sign of endearment as we saw when Yahweh first called Moses at the beginning of Exodus. God cites five attributes that characterize him—all of which would be welcome to Moses and the Israelites, who needed very much to count on his compassion toward them in light of their having previously angered him by their behavior. Indeed Yahweh begins with his compassion. Everything Yahweh says is designed to reassure Moses and the Israelites.

God then issued a corrective against the natural human tendency to accept grace on the assumption that because an infinite God can produce an infinite amount of grace, sin has no significant consequence. This corrective is introduced simply by the normal Hebrew word for “and,” which the NIV justifiably translates “yet” but which is not a strong adversative word. Perhaps an even more revealing, even if tendentious, translation would be something like: “[Forgiving wickedness, rebellion and sin] and at the same time not letting anybody off [i.e., making sure that the guilty get what they deserve].”

Note earlier comments about punishing the sins of the children.

Verses 8-9. Moses voices his great concern will God still go with Israel.

Three instructive points may be taken from verse 8. First, note that Moses’ natural and immediate (“at once”) response to being in the presence of God was to worship (“bowed to the ground ... and worshiped”). When human beings are where God is, they ought to honor him by their thoughts and actions. In the Old Covenant his special presence was localized from the point of view of human perception, so people worshiped him where they understood him to have shown himself approachable: either at his visible sanctuary (Sinai, tabernacle, tent of meeting, temple) or where he manifested his glory through a cloud (as here).¹⁷⁵ In the New Covenant he promises to be present wherever people gather for worship, something akin to the Old Covenant promise to inhabit the tabernacle when it was properly erected and furnished but much democratized because gathering for worship can take place at millions of locations at once, whereas in the Old Covenant it took place legally only at one. Moreover, in the New Covenant God actually indwells believers through his Spirit, thus making a worshipful approach to all of life appropriate. This worshipful approach is not the same as full-blown corporate worship but an elevation of the significance of daily life for the obedient believer as opposed to the nonbeliever.

Second, note that for Moses worship preceded appeal. He would certainly again press his deep desire for God’s presence on the journey to Canaan, but first he showed God his priorities: adoration ahead of supplication.

Third, worship is an act that exalts the one being worshiped but seeks to draw no favorable attention to the worshiper. Moses “bowed to the ground” following the standard way of his culture: reducing his profile and placing himself at the mercy of the one above him, that is, indicating his unworthiness and submission. Worship that draws attention to self, in either the Old or the New Covenant, is flawed.

Verse 9

In verse 9 Moses appeals to the merciful characteristics of God.

Moses thus asked for nothing less than complete acceptance of the nation (“take us as your inheritance”). The verb used here for “take as inheritance” is *nāḥal*, which has already appeared in 23:30 and 32:13 in reference to Israel’s possession/inheritance of the land of Canaan as a fulfillment of the promises to the Patriarchs and in its noun form *naḥālāh* as the promised land of inheritance in the song of Moses (15:17). But here the emphasis is not on the land Israel would inherit but on Israel as the inheritor of Yahweh’s favor and protection—Israel as the firstborn son, the prime heir of the blessings of the father.

This is an example of the way covenant relationships have as their backdrop kinship relationships so that covenant loyalty (*ḥesed*) is equivalent to family membership. Moses could make this request in spite of the fact that he acknowledged Israel as a “stiff-necked” (stubborn and inclined to rebellion¹⁸²) people. How? Because of God’s forgiving nature, which can dismiss the guilt of even the most rebellious sinners.

Verses 10-11

In verses 10-11 God answers keep my covenant and I will go with you. God agrees to a full covenant restoration – a full restoration of the Sinai covenant not a revision. This is also clear from the sample commandments quoted in verses 14-16. But this was not merely the sort of covenant *renewal* that would take place at various future times in Israel’s history either. This was, rather, a divine *restoration* of a broken covenant, one that had been made temporarily null and void by Israel’s corporate return to idolatry. Therefore God used the present tense statement, “I am making a covenant with you.” He was making the same Sinai covenant once again, but he was indeed *making* it anew, remaking it, not just reminding the people of the content of it.

Many aspects of the covenant structure are re-identified – God and Israel v27. Verse 11 lists a requirement for the promises made by God – obey the covenant terms. That means a complete adherence to all the terms of the Sinai covenant. What Moses and the Israelites would especially desire as a first sort of blessing once they reached the promised land was then added as a promise: the expulsion of the groups currently occupying the promised land, in accordance with the original covenant guarantees to Abraham.

Verses 12-16

Warn against treaties with other inhabitants of the Promised Land.

This section (34:12–16) and the one that follows (34:17–26) represent the stipulations, blessings, and warnings in the reinstated covenant. Since the original covenant text was stated in chaps. 20–23 (followed by the ratification ceremony in chap. 24 and thereafter tabernacle/worship plans), it is natural to regard the Ten Words (20:2–17) as the opening of the text of the covenant proper and the ending of the Covenant Code (23:12–33) as its closing. The Ten Words/Commandments will be repeated on the new tablets (34:1, 4), and

the ending of the Covenant Code is repeated here, though not with exactly the same wording. Thus through an *inclusio* the entire original covenant formulation of chaps. 20–24 is renewed—leaving aside, of course, the instructions for formulating the tabernacle/worship implements (chaps. 25–31) since these refer to things not yet constructed or put into practice and therefore not breakable as part of the covenant breaking that took place with the golden bull/calf incident of chap. 32.

Verses 13-14 command the destruction of everything connected with idolatry. Here occurs the first mention in the Old Testament of “Asherah poles” or sacred poles/posts [NRSV and other versions]. In this context, as in Deut 7:5; 12:3; 16:21, the masculine plural of *āšēr* probably refers to any sort of carved wooden structure that was used as a divine symbol of some sort in pagan religion in that day rather than being limited only to Asherah poles, that is, pole-based carved representations of the goddess Asherah, the consort of the Canaanite weather-god Baal and a fertility benefactress according to local Canaanite thinking.

What Israel had to do if they were to keep the covenant was not again to have any of the accoutrements of idolatry—altars, sacred stones, sacred poles/posts—or any other god than Yahweh. V14 should really be translated “You must worship no other god, because Yahweh is jealous for his name. He is a jealous God.” As we’ve seen many times names were important in those days, they expressed your character. So God is jealous for his name he doesn’t want his character to be misrepresented.

Verse 15 Yahweh’s covenant is exclusive. Most people are guided into a religion by imitation of those around them, that’s why Yahweh warns that having pagan people among them will lead them into idolatry.

This is what actually happened again and again in Israel.

Verse 16 intermarriage is never discouraged by the Bible on ethnic grounds but it is discouraged on religious grounds. There is nothing negative in the mixing of races, but there is great danger in the mixing of religions. What eventually became a severe problem blocking progress in the Judean restoration was a risk already for the Israelites at this early stage in their history as a people because they had grown up among varied ethnic groups in Egypt, were camping at Mount Sinai with various ethnic groups in their midst, and could easily assume that there were few hazards attendant to mixing with other national groups. Over time young men and young women would meet each other and ask their parents to arrange their marriages (as in the prominent example of Sampson in Judg 14:1–10), so it would be almost inevitable that as international marriages then took place, those marriages would bring idolatry into Israel. It happened that way with Solomon (1 Kgs 11:3–4) because marriages in Bible times, as today, were rarely blocked and often not even much discouraged for reasons of religious incompatibility. But Yahweh insisted otherwise here, knowing the inclinations of his people and the power of romantic attraction to overcome inadequate religious conviction.

Of particular significance was that throughout the biblical world, marriage usually involved a woman’s leaving her home and family and moving to her husband’s ancestral home to become a member of his family. If the religious convictions and habits of a non-Israelite woman were, as would be expected by the time she reached marriageable age, well established, she would import them into Israel upon getting married to an Israelite and going into Israel to live within his household.²⁰⁵ This explains the wording of the warning in this

verse, “When you choose ... daughters as wives for your sons ... they will lead your sons ...” It was normally the women coming into Israel through marriage that brought idolatry with them. The women leaving Israel to marry into non-Israelite nations posed little threat to the purity of Israel’s religion. Since Israelite men stayed put when they married, they were not normally the source of the threat either.

Verses 17-26

Give sample laws for the covenant renewal – they’re part of the reason we can state so confidently it was a renewal not a new covenant.

Verses 19-20a expand somewhat on the more succinct law in 13:13, “Redeem with a lamb every firstborn donkey, but if you do not redeem it, break its neck. Redeem every firstborn among your sons.” Thus, just as the prior law (34:18) references commandments from chap. 12, this one references a command from chap. 13—showing that while the new “decatalogue” derives mainly from material earlier in chaps. 20–23 and especially chap. 23, it is not limited to that corpus but seeks to reiterate, through sampling, any and all divine covenant requirements from earlier in the book.

Redemption laws represent God’s kindness to his people. By rights he owned everything that was born first among any group, whether animal or human, just as the firstfruits of what was grown were also his. But although he did insist on receiving the first of all that was harvested from crops, he did not in fact want his people to give away to him every person or animal that was born first. Some of these were best kept by their families or their owners. So although they technically belonged to God and ought in theory simply to be given to him, he would allow them to be “repurchased” from him by a payment, and he would receive the payment in lieu of the animal or person. Such was the basic idea behind redemption laws, as indicated by the language of v. 19.

In the case of the present law, three instances of how to handle redemption situations are then indicated paradigmatically in v. 20, as sufficient to represent all similar cases. Since donkeys were not needed at the tabernacle/temple but were beasts of burden that would be much better put to use by individual families on their farms, God allowed them to be redeemed through a substituted lamb or goat kid. Female donkeys would be kept for breeding, but since only one male stud would usually be needed for a herd of donkeys, an Israelite with a large number of newborn male donkeys might choose simply to euthanize some of them quickly, by breaking their necks, rather than go to the expense of substituting a lamb or goat kid for them. This God allowed since in either case he did not want or need donkeys at the tabernacle, either as sacrificial animals or as work animals, and the taking of animal life was simply not a sin as the taking of human life would be.

The final redemption command, “Redeem all your firstborn sons,” leaves no option for euthanasia in the case of humans. God does not want child sacrifice, nor does he want the forcible taking of children from their families for tabernacle/temple service. Therefore all firstborn humans must be redeemed so that they could remain alive and with their families, even though from a theoretical point of view they would be Yahweh’s property from birth.

In verse 20b The command “No one is to appear before me empty-handed” restates a principal of worship, verbatim from 23:15: believers show their loyalty to God by coming to worship him with a gift rather than with nothing to offer. Worshipers have to give evidence of their covenant loyalty. In the New Covenant the gift is typically monetary, but in the Old

it was something that could be eaten, according to the prescriptions of the covenant law, because all worship involved eating a covenant renewal meal, the ingredients of which were provided by the worshipers to be prepared and then shared with the priests and with God.

Verse 21 adds the specifics of even during the plowing and harvest season to the original commandment – we’re not to be tempted to do our normal work on God’s day unless the need is absolutely dire, although we are allowed to do good (Luke 13:14-17).

Plowing/planting and harvesting/reaping are the two most intense times in a farmer’s life. The temptation to work seven-day weeks is very strong during these seasons since plowing and harvesting at the right time can be essential to crop productivity, and “beating the weather” can seem to necessitate taking no time off during these crucial periods, that is, working through Sabbath days. But the combination of worship and rest provided by the Sabbath was more important to God—and should have been more important to the worshiper—than farm productivity. In other words, the concept of responding to an emergency, such as is constituted by the need to rescue an animal from a pit on the Sabbath (e.g., Luke 14:5), cannot be extrapolated to suggest that maximizing one’s potential for a good crop constitutes a similar emergency and therefore could justify working on the Sabbath day. In the life of the New Covenant believer, worship, prayer, Scripture study, and Christian service must likewise take precedence over making money, lest gaining the temporal world result in losing one’s eternal soul (Mark 8:36; Luke 9:25).

Verse 24 - The first part of this verse reiterates the divine promise to drive out the inhabitants of Canaan, as had been stated in 23:27–30. Moreover, the overt first-person promise “I will drive out” represents yet another reassurance that as a result of Moses’ pleading on behalf of the people in chaps. 33–34, Yahweh himself would accompany the people to the promised land and settle them there—not merely sending an angel (33:2) to do the job and not merely accompanying them under some sort of hyper-limited divine presence devoid of its usual power or glory (33:12–19). “[I will] enlarge your territory” presumably predicts the creation of the promised land as an Israelite possession by the process of its conquest (described in Josh 1–11) rather than a promise that God would keep enlarging the borders of Israel thereafter.

Verse 25. No eating of blood which was a pagan Canaanite practice and no delay in the consumption of the sacrificial meal.

Verse 26a both the crop farmer and the herdsman must bring the best and nothing less. So when we tithe we should give from our gross income not hand over what loose change we have left.

Verse 26b repeats 23:19 and is forbidden because it was part of the practices of fertility religion. The sowing of fields with two kinds of seed was forbidden for the same reason.

Verses 27 and 28 are the document clause – putting the covenant in writing. So Moses had to write down all the words of the covenant, not just the Ten Words/Commandments, which would be recorded separately and personally on the two tablets by God himself (34:1). What did Moses write? Everything from 20:18 to the present point in the narrative that constitutes covenant commands that he had not written down already, specifically the content of chaps. 25–31 minus strictly narrative portions thereof and at least 34:10–26.

Part of the evidence that Moses wrote the Pentateuch.

God personally wrote the ten commandments on the tablets.

Verses 29-35

Moses came back down Mt Sinai reflecting God's glory.

Any reader of Exodus at any time in history might justifiably ask, "What's the point of all this attention to how much Moses' face shone? Why does it conclude such an important narrative as that of chaps. 32–34?" In fact, Moses reviewed the story of his radiant face here in considerable detail because it had important implications.

First, it confirmed—even reestablished—his leadership and role as intermediary with God on behalf of the people: Moses really did meet with God, whose glory was so awesome (even when restricted by the cloud in which the meeting took place and even though Moses could only see God's "back") that it left an effect upon Moses that everyone else could not fail to attribute to his having been in God's (limited) presence and therefore to have been confirmed by God as Israel's human leader.

Second, it confirmed Yahweh's presence, the very thing sought so assiduously by Moses in his various appeals in chaps. 33–34 and so missed by the people when they thought they might have lost it (33:1–5). If people couldn't even bear to look at Moses because his face was powerfully affected, however residually and partially, by Yahweh's glory, then that glory, not at all residual in Yahweh himself, was back among Israel!

Third, it confirmed Yahweh's greatness. What pagan worshiper ever glowed with the reflection of an idol's glory? What other nation could claim that its god was so awesome that one who had spent time with him terrified all others in that nation by the mere retained reflection of the divinity's glory?

Fourth, it reminded all those who seek constantly for an ever-closer relationship with God that one can actually have so close a connection with the only true and living God that one may not even notice the extent of the effect ("he was not aware that his face was radiant," v. 29)—though, to be sure, the kind of reflected glory Moses experienced would be expected in heaven rather than on earth.

Fifth, as Paul explained in his discussion of this passage in 2 Cor 3:7–18, the "glory that lasts" from the New Covenant was in fact much greater than the Old Covenant glory on Moses' face that faded over time. Consistent with this emphasis, Jesus taught that any person who knows God through Christ in the New Covenant has gone far beyond even the remarkable glory of Moses after coming down from Sinai because of the significance of the indwelling of the Holy Spirit and what it means in terms of the presence of God in one's life in Christ (Matt 11:11). All who know Christ as Savior and live for him reflect his glory—even more powerfully than Moses did, though without the visible frightening effect—by reason of living the transforming life of the Spirit (2 Cor 3:18).

Again Moses comes back with two tablets each containing the full text of the ten commandments that would eventually go into the Ark of the Covenant. Moses didn't know

his face was radiant. This reflecting of God's glory was obviously not harmful or painful, perhaps because God's favour rested on Moses.

In verse 30 I don't think the brightness of the light forced people to look away rather they were frightened.

Chapter 35

Exodus 35–40 contains a high proportion of the same material already revealed in chaps. 25–31, but not in the same order. Several factors account for this reordering, most of which will be addressed in detail below in the commentary on specific passages. Foremost among these factors is the need to portray in chaps. 35–40 how the various objects were actually constructed in order. In chaps. 25–31 the call for Israelites to bring as donations materials out of which the tabernacle and its furnishings can be made is followed by a description of the objects themselves in the order of their importance and holiness, that is, moving from the most sacred (the ark, a direct representation of Yahweh and the place of his contact with his people) to the least sacred (the courtyard perimeter).

In chaps. 35–40 by contrast the objects are described in the order they were actually constructed, an order dictated by common sense and necessity. A modern analogy might be found in the difference between how a church might be described before being built and the order in which it would actually be built. If a church building committee were describing what they wanted their new church to be like, they might well start by describing the sanctuary, then perhaps certain other interior rooms, then perhaps the general external appearance, what sort of steeple (or not) might be desired, furnishings, lighting, and other décor. But a builder could not build the church in that order. He would start with clearing the site, then pouring footings, and then a foundation, and then sills, then the framing. The building committee's ordering of its desires would be completely appropriate, but so would the builder's ordering of the building process. The two orders are not the same, and no one who really understands the building process from conception to construction would expect them to be. The vision comes in one order, the implementation in another.

Additionally, there are places where something stated in detail in chaps. 25–31 is more succinctly summarized in chaps. 35–40 and other cases where something stated in chaps. 25–31 is expanded upon in chaps. 35–40. We will examine these as they occur in the text. The general reasons for such differences appear to be twofold.

First, in an oral society some differences between command wording and fulfillment wording were needed in order to help the listener keep aware of which section of the literary work he or she was listening to. Much can be repeated verbatim, but if everything is, then the long stretch of completely identical material actually confuses, rather than helps, the listener.

Second, the fulfillment section (chaps. 35–40) is intended to complement, not merely to repeat, the first without differentiation (chaps. 25–31). It reinforces and builds upon what has already been stated and does this by variations that although modest in number and scope compared to the repetitions are still welcome as "fresh." Psychologically, the hearer/reader recognizes that this new material is not just prior material but information that has been reshaped and repackaged so that it comes across with sufficient novelty as to be of interest and to seem worthy of careful attention. Another way to put it is this: the bits and pieces of

different material keep the hearer/reader attentive and willing to listen to the repetitions of the bulk of the same material once again.

The following table lists the main comparisons between chaps. 25–31 and 35–40, with occasional references to fulfillments or repetitions of commands in Leviticus or Numbers, where these are also useful for comparison.

Command	Fulfillment
25:1–7	call for offerings of various materials 35:4–9; 35:21–29
25:10–22	the ark 37:1–9
25:23–30	the table 37:10–16
25:31–39	the lampstand 37:17–24
26:1–37	the tabernacle proper 36:8–38
27:1–8	bronze altar for burnt offerings 38:1–7
27:20–21	oil for the lampstand command renewed in Lev 24:1–3
28:1–5	priests' dress summary command renewed in 35:19; fulfilled in 39:1, 41; cf. 40:13–14; Lev 8:7–8
28:6–14	ephod 39:2–7
28:15–30	breastpiece 39:8–21; Lev 8:8
28:31–43	remaining priests' garments 39:22–31
29:1–37	consecrating priests Lev 8:1–36
29:38–43	daily offerings command renewed in Num 28:1–8
29:44	consecration of tabernacle consecration of altar command renewed in 40:9 command renewed in 40:10 fulfilled in Lev 8:11
29:44	consecration of priests command renewed in 40:13
30:1–5	incense altar 37:25–28
30:6	incense altar placement command renewed in 40:6 fulfilled in 40:26
30:7–9	rules for incense burning 40:27

30:10	atonement for incense altar	command renewed in Lev 4:7
30:17–21	bronze washing basin	38:8; 40:30
30:22–33	anointing oil for objects, priests	35:28; 37:29; 40:9; Lev 8:10–12, 30
30:34–38	incense	35:28; 37:29; 39:38; 40:27
31:1–11	Bezalel and Oholiab/work overview	35:30–35; 36:1–7
31:12–17	Sabbath	command renewed in 35:1–3; Lev 23:3; cf. Num 15:32–36; Deut 5:12–15

The covenant has been written down and taught to the people and they have accepted Moses' leadership again. Now it's time to fulfill what was commanded about the tabernacle. The Sabbath was one of the regular signs of the covenant and the text begins here.

In a certain sense Israel's *formal* starting point for keeping Yahweh's covenant was keeping the Sabbath, that is, the fourth word/commandment, not because doing so was more important than fulfilling the first three words/commandments but because obedience to the Sabbath requirement was the most obviously measurable of them—either in the keeping or in the disobeying. By the fact that he kept (or did not keep) the Sabbath each week, an Israelite showed without ambiguity whether or not he was committed to keeping the covenant. Merely keeping the Sabbath did not confer righteousness if other commandments were violated, but it was an openly visible essential—a *sine qua non*—of covenant loyalty. Not to keep it would be to say publicly to the world “I am not in covenant relationship with the Lord of the Sabbath.”

It's also reminding the Israelites that they mustn't break the Sabbath in constructing the tabernacle.

I think the command against lighting a fire was related to cooking meals. You needed a fire to cook, although the prohibition doesn't extend to fire in the tabernacle and preparing sacrifices.

Verses 4-29

Deal with offerings for tabernacle.

In verses 4-9 God calls for materials

Verses 10-19 God calls for skilled workers.

Verses 20-29 the people respond to the call for materials. Both men and women responded.

Verses 35:30-36:1

Deal with the work of Bezaliel, Oholiab and the other skilled craftsmen.

Verses 36:2-7

Deal with the oversubscription of materials. The rapid fulfillment of the commandment says much about their repentance after the calf/bull episode and their consequent response to the divine call. Moses was eventually required to insist rather forcefully to all the people (“throughout the camp”) that no more material could be donated, since all required supplies had reached full levels. Some men and women gathered or spun or wove or dyed or otherwise prepared tabernacle contributions that never were used for the tabernacle? Such overages probably were put to some other use by families and clans, but they were not used at the tabernacle.

Verses 36:8-38

Deal with the actual construction of the tabernacle.

Verses 37:1-9

The construction of the Ark. The only new thing we learn is that Bezaliel made it.

Verses 37:10-16

Deal with the construction of the tabernacle table

Verses 37:17-24

Deal with the construction of the lampstand.

Verses 37:25-28

Deal with the construction of the altar.

Verses 37:29

Deals with the composition of the oil and the incense.

Verses 38:1-7

Deal with the construction of the main altar.

Verse 38:8

Deal with the construction of the bronze basin and stand. It was made from special bronze from mirrors.

Verses 38:9-20

Deal with the construction of the courtyard

Verses 38:21-31

Are an account of the materials used

Verses 39:1-31

Deal with the construction of the priestly garments.

Verses 39:32-43

Moses inspects the work and finds all as God had commanded.

From an accommodationist, human point of view, one might be tempted to forgive the Israelites if they encountered difficulty completing the tabernacle in all facets and therefore had to start worshipping at it when it was not yet fully furnished, or perhaps before all of its surfaces were completely overlaid with the precious metals required in the instructions. After all, they were working in a wilderness on this project, relying solely on donated materials, using at least some tools that might have had to be manufactured after leaving Egypt—so who could blame them if they didn't completely finish the tabernacle and do a perfect job on every detail the first time around? But that was not the case because it was not what God would have allowed. “All the work ... was completed” (v. 32); they “did everything just as the LORD [had] commanded Moses” (vv. 32, 42); “Moses inspected the work and saw that they had done it just as the LORD had commanded” (v. 43). So full had been the participation of the people, so generous their donations, so skilled the workmen, so diligent the experts assigned to the work, so high in quality the materials, and so precisely inspected the final product that the tabernacle was just right—a perfect fulfillment of the divinely revealed ideal and a flawless place at which to worship the only true God. The present passage reassures the reader of these facts. Israel was off to a proper start in its covenant relationship with God: it had the place and means of worship exactly as it should have had them.

Many things related to the tabernacle remain to be addressed, however—even things that impinge directly on the tabernacle. For example, in Leviticus and Numbers the reader finds that Moses recorded extensive divine guidance (including oversight and approval) on such matters as how and why sacrifices were to be offered at the tabernacle, how and why priests were to be consecrated/ordained for service at the tabernacle,³¹⁵ how the tabernacle was to be set up and taken down, and where it was to be placed within the Israelite encampment, and so on. In other words, the end of Exodus was not the end of the tabernacle story, nor was the narrative of the completion of the tabernacle materials to be equated to the completion of what Moses would have to say about the purpose and function of the tabernacle.

Chapter 40:1-33

The tabernacle is set up.

In Exodus “the first month” refers to mid-March to mid-April, as already defined in 12:2, 18. The Israelites, along with many other ancient peoples, regarded the turn of the year as taking place at the end of winter and the beginning of spring rather than sometime after the start of winter, as is the modern tendency. The tabernacle had been finished in just under a year from the time the Israelites had left Egypt. For it to be set up on the first day of the first month of the year represented a way of celebrating the new year—in effect a way of linking the new year with worship.³²⁸

By commanding Moses to set up the tabernacle “on the first day of the first month,” God was also indicating that the whole job could be done in a day. The tabernacle was intended to be highly portable, and its portability would be tested with the first setup. Worship was so important to the traveling Israelites that had they required more than a few hours to set up their tabernacle, it would potentially have hindered their ability to move quickly, at God's command, in the wilderness.

Verses 34-38

The Glory of God

The cloud is the sign of Yahweh's presence that had accompanied them on their exodus from Egypt and appeared on Mt Sinai and at the tent of meeting. It was a way God chose to manifest himself—a visible presence—indicating symbol of an invisible God. In the hot, arid wilderness of Sinai, where the sun beat down mercilessly upon people, plants, and animals, a cloud during the day represented a cool, beneficent, shade-giving divine kindness. But the cloud was much more than that. It displayed Yahweh's glory, which was an awesome and frightening thing the closer one got to it. Accordingly, as the Israelites saw the cloud, they understood it to be a potentially overwhelming manifestation of the presence of their God, to be avoided carefully and not infringed upon.

Yahweh showed the Israelites that the rift they had created by breaking the covenant had been healed and Yahweh went into the house that had been carefully constructed for him.

Verses 36 to 38 show how God's presence governed the journey of the Israelites to the promised land. Just as it had appeared as a dark cloud in the daytime and a fire in the nighttime prior to Sinai (13:21), so it now also changed appearance from day to night and back again as it hovered over the tabernacle (v. 38). The once relatively distant cloud (either far above them in the wilderness or on Mount Sinai or at the entrance to the little tent of meeting outside the camp) was now in the center of their encampment, right above the dwelling place of their God, who "lived" inside his tabernacle. They could see the cloud at all times, so it could at all times guide them in their travels (v. 38).

Once built, the tabernacle became the symbol of Yahweh's presence among his people; and his glory cloud atop the tabernacle, a further symbol of his presence and also of his guidance. The book of Exodus comes to an end here, with the reader implicitly invited to appreciate that a new grand chapter in the history of the Israelites was about to get underway—their travels toward Sinai as their God would lead them. Moses' very next words in the Pentateuch continue the tabernacle story (Lev 1:1, "The LORD called to Moses and spoke to him from the Tent of Meeting"), confirming that the tabernacle was the place from which God would communicate with him and through him to Israel from then on. The invisible, only true God no longer spoke at a distance, on Sinai, but now to Moses, the people's honored and accepted representative, from within their very midst.

Wonderful as this was, it was but a shadow of the closeness to God available now to his corporate people known as the church and his direct indwelling available to every individual who repents of sin and trusts in God's gift of salvation through Christ³⁵⁰—his New Covenant's new Moses and his for-all-time honored and accepted representative, rescuer,³⁵² lawgiver, law ender,³⁵⁴ and heavenly Temple.