

Preface



Familiarity with the Bible has been largely lost to the church. For the most part, we believe that this is true because people don't have time to read it, and when they do, they simply don't know what to do with it. Many people desire to know God's Word, but feel that they are groping blindly as they seek to figure out how to make Scripture relevant to their lives. Often the Old Testament is presented as if it were a haphazard collection of moralistic lessons or endless lists of names and dates. The New Testament may seem more directly applicable to Christians today, but still much of it seems alien. What are we to make of references to phylacteries and tassels (Matt. 23:5)? And what of commands to greet one another with a "kiss of love" (1 Peter 5:14), or which forbid women from wearing pearls or braided hair (1 Tim. 2:9)? And what about all those strange and puzzling images in the book of Revelation? We want to obey the Bible, but don't know quite how it applies. We read and study the Bible, but our effort often leaves us empty and yet mystified about how its power works in our lives.

For many, their experience with the Bible is similar to the piñata game. A target is "out there," but they are blindfolded and have been turned around so many times that they are entirely disoriented and don't know where to aim. They flail wildly at the air and become frustrated with an exercise that offers so little return for their effort. In this book we want to remove the blindfold, and point you, the reader, in the right direction.

Our goal is to go beyond basic Bible content to help you know its meaning and just what you are supposed to do with it. We hope that this approach will remedy the all-too-frequent caricature of the Old Testament as little more than endless trivia, irrelevant history, and obscure prophecies only alleviated by some comforting psalms and models for living from the heroes and heroines of the faith; and that the New Testament narratives, letters, and prophecies are neither simple moral codes (which can all be applied directly to your situation) nor dry and dusty history. They are rather *our history*, the story of how God revealed himself in the person of Jesus Christ to men and women of faith—our spiritual ancestors, and how these followers of Jesus launched the greatest movement in human history. You will be impressed with the way that the Bible uniquely reveals the God of the universe. That *is* the purpose of the Bible. These 66 books do not contain simply human ideas and experiences of God.

They contain God's revelation of himself. When you read its pages, you encounter God himself.

In *The Essential Bible Companion*, you will gain not only an appreciation for the central importance of this sacred text, but in doing so will come to appreciate the

literature, theology, and history for the contribution they make and the role that they play in the greater story of God's plan for reconciling his creation to himself, restoring his presence in his creation, and forging a relationship with his people.

Overview



What Is the Bible All About?

The Bible is all about connecting with God. Three key words will help us to get the big picture: Presence, Revelation, and Relationship. Everything God does in the Bible shows us that he deeply desires to be in relationship with us. That is why he created us. When we love someone, as God loves us, we want to be with that person. But being in the presence of a loved one is only one part of what is essential to a relationship. The other main ingredient is that we desire to know the other person as fully as we can. This is where the concept of revelation comes in. Being together with a loved one provides the opportunity to get to know one another, so that the relationship can grow.

Across the pages of the Bible God is building relationship with his people as he reveals himself to us. Seven stages of God's presence show us this process through the Old and New Testaments. A brief look at them will help us to have a framework that we can use as we read through the Bible.

The Garden of Eden

When God created us he made this world to be like a temple. A temple in the ancient world was where God lived. So we would say that he built this world as a place to live—not because he needed a place to live, but because his plan was to create people to live with him here. The work of the Spirit of God in Genesis 1:2 shows his presence even in the initial stages of creation, until Eden was established as the first place of God's presence. Adam and Eve were put in Eden to be with God and in relationship with him. Unfortunately, the path of disobedience led to the rupture of the relationship and the loss of access to God's presence. Genesis 4:26 reports that people began to call on the name of God—an indication that they were invoking his presence—because they realized what they had lost. The builders of the Tower of Babel were attempting to recover God's presence by providing a stairway for him to descend and be worshiped. But this human initiative was based on distorted ideas of God, and therefore it failed.

The Covenant

God's initiative to reestablish his presence and relationship came through the covenant that he made with Abraham (Gen. 12). Through

Abraham and his family all the nations of the world were to be blessed, because through them he would reveal himself (so that people could know him) and make relationship possible again.

The Burning Bush and Mount Sinai

At the burning bush God's presence blazed as he revealed his name to Moses and told of how he would make himself known to Israel and the world. Through the plagues and the deliverance of the Israelites from Egypt, the theme is constantly repeated: "You will know that I am the Lord Your God." His presence will result in revelation (you will *know*) and relationship (*your* God). His presence is with them in the form of the pillar of cloud and fire as he leads them through the wilderness to Mount Sinai. Then his presence becomes manifest on Mount Sinai and the law is given, revealing his holiness to Israel and establishing the guidelines for them to be in relationship with him.

The Tabernacle and Temple

The reason God revealed his holiness and guidelines for behavior was so that he could live in the midst of his people. This fourth stage involved God actually establishing a new outpost on earth. He gave Israel the design of a portable sanctuary called the tabernacle. It was to be a place to house his presence—a way that he could be with his people. After it was built, Exodus 40:34 reports that "the glory of the LORD filled the tabernacle." In the time of David and Solomon the portable sanctuary was replaced by a building, the temple. Throughout the rest of the Old Testament God continued to reveal himself to the Israelites through their history and through the prophets. This is the revelation preserved in our Bibles. Yet Israel's disobedience continued to hinder the relationship. God's presence continued to be evident in the temple, but it was also reflected in the work of the Spirit of the Lord that empowered people with his presence to do his work (including leaders—such as judges and kings—and spokesmen, the prophets).

The Incarnation

The prophet Isaiah had spoken of a child called Immanuel—"God with us"—one who would represent God's presence among his people. Who could have imagined then that God would actually take on flesh in the person of his son, Jesus Christ, to be with his people? This fifth stage of God's presence is explained in John 1:14: "The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the One and Only, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth." The word for "dwelling" is related to the word used for the tabernacle and temple from stage four. In the new age of salvation, Jesus replaces the Jerusalem temple (John 2:20–21), providing access to God's presence (Heb. 10:19–21). His sacrificial death supersedes the sacrifices made in the Old Testament temple, achieves full and complete forgiveness of sins, and establishes a new covenant between God and his people (Heb. 9:11–15). Jesus not only represented the next stage of God's *presence*, he also represented the climax of God's *revelation* (Heb. 1:1–2; John 1:18) and was God's provision for the full restoration of *relationship* (2 Cor. 5:17–19). Through Christ we can know God more fully and be reconciled to God through what Jesus did for us on the cross.

Pentecost

Jesus assured his disciples that when he left, he would send another sign of God's presence, the Holy Spirit (John 14:15–27). This began on the day of Pentecost as the disciples were gathered in the upper room and the Spirit came rushing upon them. Here God's presence was established permanently on earth in the hearts of his people who had become the living temple of God (1 Cor. 3:16; 6:19; 1 Peter 2:5–6). Christians have been restored to *relationship* with God through Christ and enjoy his *presence* among us through the Holy Spirit which is in us. We are his ambassadors as he continues to *reveal* himself to the world through his people (2 Cor. 5:19–21).

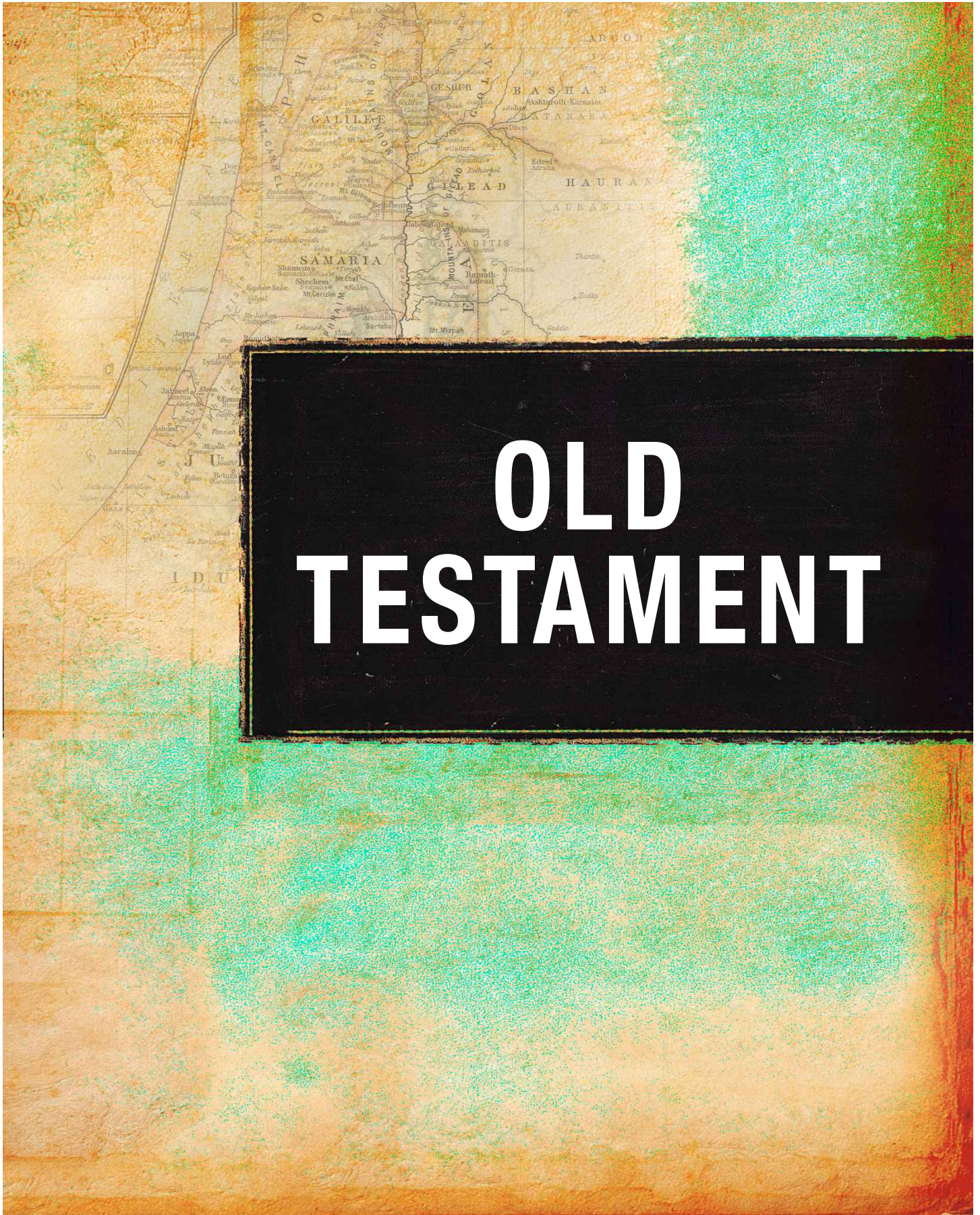
New Creation

Yet one stage remains, as the book of Revelation speaks of the return of Christ and the creation of the new heavens and the new earth. Revelation 21:3 says, “And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, ‘Now the dwelling of God is with men, and he will live with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God.’” God will have completed his plan of *revelation*, his *presence* will be established as it

was in the beginning, and his people will be in *relationship* with him, enjoying his presence throughout eternity.

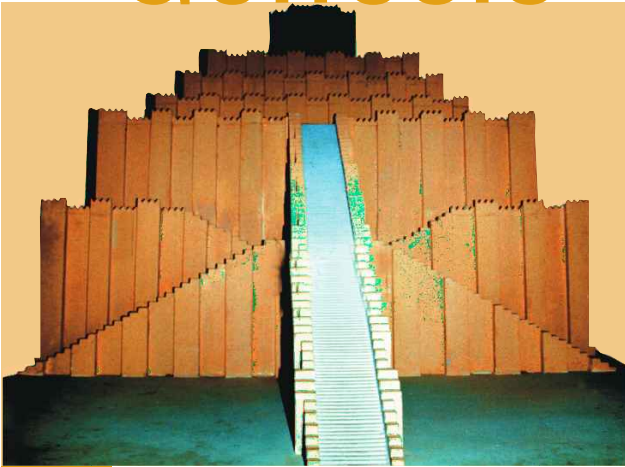
This is what the Bible is all about. God has revealed himself to us so that we might know him, be in relationship with him, and enjoy his presence. He created us for this, and the Bible tells us the story and the way. May God bless you as you read it.





OLD TESTAMENT

Genesis



Key Concepts

- The covenant is God's program of revelation.
- The focus of creation is the establishment and maintenance of order and operation.
- The stories in the Bible are stories about God.

← Model of a ziggurat tower from the Baghdad Museum. The Tower of Babel likely would have looked similar.

© Dr. James C. Martin

Key Terms

Fall—The result of the disobedience of Adam and Eve that brought sin into the world and alienated God from humankind.

Flood—God's judgment on the world due to the lawlessness and violence of humanity. Only Noah, a righteous man, and his family were spared.

Tower of Babel—Building project that offended God and prompted him to confuse the language.

Patriarchs—The founding ancestors of the nation of Israel: Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.

Birthright—The material inheritance given to children on the death of their father. It usually went to sons, with the first-born receiving twice what the other sons received.

Yahweh—The personal name for God.

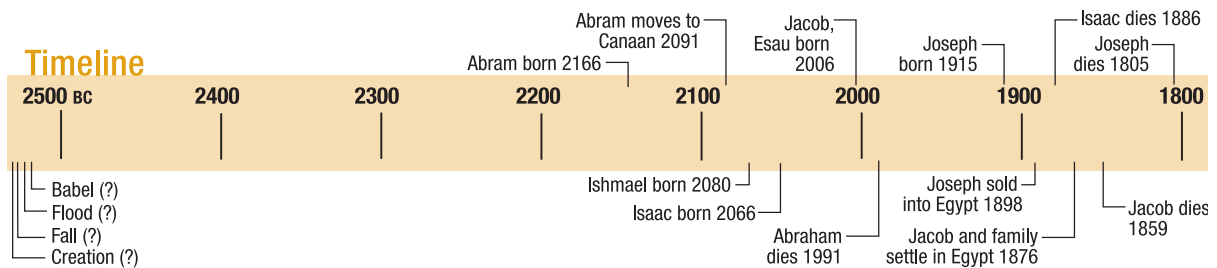
Covenant—God's agreement with Abraham and his descendants by which he would bring blessing to the world.

Key Teachings about God

- God established and maintains order in the cosmos.
- God overcomes obstacles to carry out his purposes.
- God reveals himself to his people.
- God's grace exceeds all logic.

People to Know

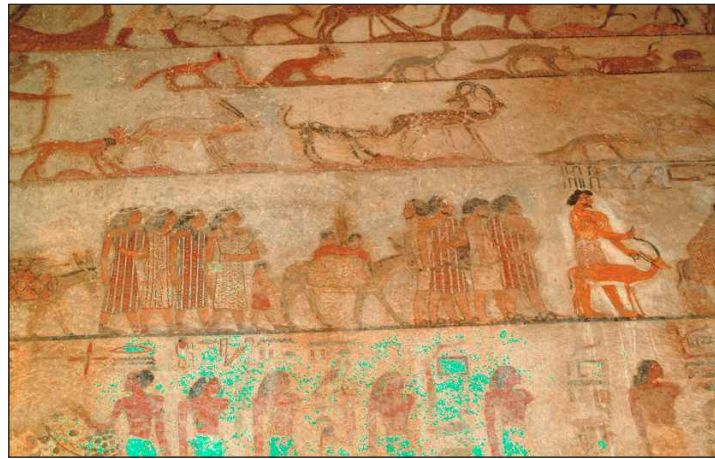
Adam and Eve	Rebekah
Cain and Abel	Esau
Noah	Jacob
Abraham	Laban
Sarah	Leah
Melchizedek	Rachel
Ishmael	Judah
Isaac	Joseph



Purpose

The purpose of this first book of the Bible is to begin the story of God and his continuing relationship with his creation, including his disappointments and the actions he takes to overcome obstacles. God shows his mastery as he creates order in the cosmos and as he brings order to his relationship with people through the covenant. Though God created everything just right, sin alienated people from God so that they no longer had an accurate idea of what he is like. This is why God made a covenant with a chosen people, Abraham and his family, a relationship that gave God a means for giving people an accurate picture of what he is like. Genesis tells how, despite many obstacles, the covenant was established.

Genesis 1–11 traces the blessing recorded in Genesis 1:28–30. The genealogies show people being fruitful and multiplying. At the same time these chapters depict the advance of sin, first in the disobedience of Adam and Eve, then in Cain’s murder of his brother Abel, and finally in the escalation of violence and corruption that results in the flood. After the flood, the people not only continue their movement away from God but make a vain attempt to reestablish his presence by building a stairway for him to come down from heaven and be worshiped on earth (the Tower of Babel).



© Dr. James C. Martin, The Egyptian Ministry of Antiquities

↑ The Beni Hasan tomb paintings date to the period of Abraham and depict Semitic travelers to the land of Egypt.

Now in addition to the problem of bringing people back to God (Eden problem), there is the problem of restoring the lost knowledge of what God is like (Babel problem). Human initiative, first by Adam and Eve, then by the builders of Babel, has had devastating results. God’s covenant with Abraham represents God’s initiative to provide a means by which God can reveal himself to the world through Abraham and his family and how the entire world could be blessed through them. The covenant blessings that serve as benefits to Abraham and his family are extensions of the original blessings in Genesis 1. The patriarchal narratives in Genesis 12–50 trace the advance of the covenant and its blessings and, at the same time, show the many obstacles. As these obstacles are overcome, one by one, God demonstrates his mastery.

KEY VERSES:

Gen. 1:28: “Be fruitful and increase in number.”

Gen. 12:3: “All peoples on earth will be blessed through you [Abraham].”

Gen. 50:20: “You intended to harm me, but God intended it for good to accomplish... the saving of many lives.”



← THE LAND OF THE BIBLE

Exodus



© Dr. James C. Martin

Key Concepts

- The law is part of God’s revelation of himself; giving it is an act of grace.
- God’s presence comes on his terms and in his time.
- Deliverance is God’s business.
- “Then you will know that I am the LORD your God.”

← Replica of the ark of the covenant.

Key Terms

Exodus—When God delivers the people of Israel from slavery in Egypt and brings them to the land he promised them.

Plagues—Ten acts of judgment against Egypt to persuade the Egyptians to let the Israelites leave.

Passover—The commemoration of the tenth plague when God punished the Egyptians with death of their firstborn sons but spared the Israelites.

Decalogue—Another name for the Ten Commandments—the central laws that God gave to Moses on stone tablets.

Election—God’s choice of individuals or groups to serve as his people in relationship with him.

I AM—The name God gives himself at the burning bush. It is from the same verb (“to be”) as the name “Yahweh” and identifies God not only as the one who *is* but also as the one who “causes to be.”

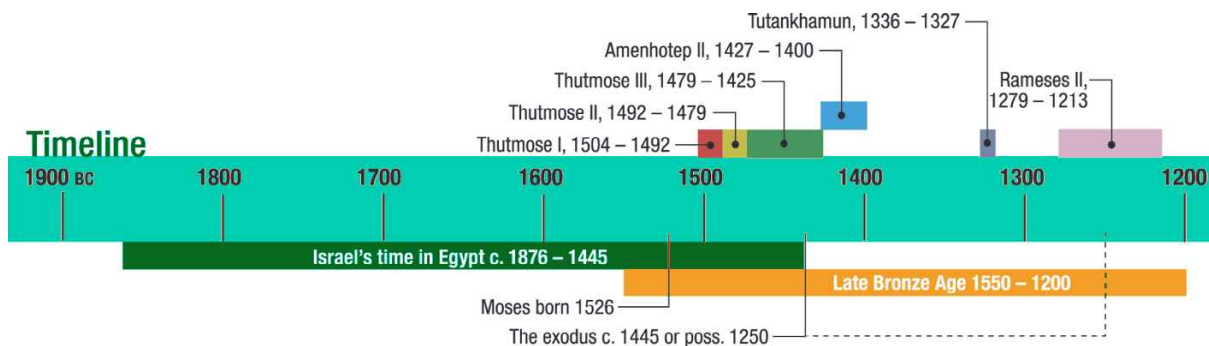
Burning Bush—The place where God revealed himself to Moses, identified himself, and explained his plan and Moses’s role in it.

Pharaoh—The title of the supreme ruler of Egypt. No name is given in Exodus, so we do not know which pharaoh let the Israelites leave.

Tabernacle—The portable tent sanctuary constructed by Israel according to God’s instructions.

Ark of the Covenant—A chest made of wood overlaid with gold that contained important signs of God’s favor, including the stone tablets of the covenant. It was the most sacred object of Israel, as it represented the footstool of the invisible throne of the invisible God. The cherubim adorning the cover were guardians of the throne of God.

Holy of Holies—The central area of the sanctuary where the ark was kept and where God’s presence dwelt. The only access was by the high priest once a year.



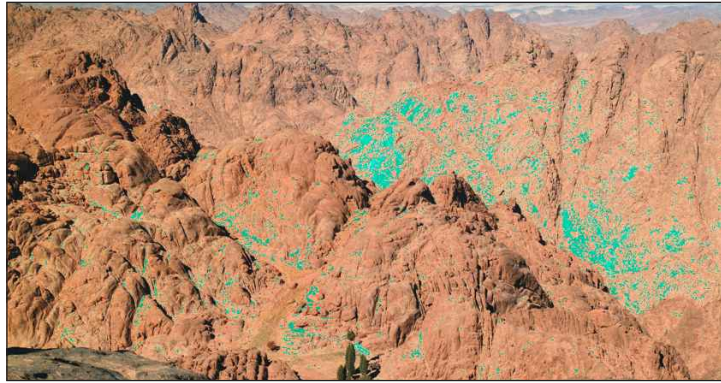
Purpose

When Exodus opens, the Israelites are near the end of their time in Egypt. They had spent more than four centuries in Egypt and had become slaves in a foreign land. God is nowhere in evidence. Their covenant with God appears to be in disarray. They no longer enjoy the benefits of having connections in high places as when they first arrived, and with no land of their own, their survival is in jeopardy. When Pharaoh orders their baby boys to be cast into the Nile River, one mother creatively does so using a basket of reeds to protect her son. Pharaoh's daughter finds him afloat, names him Moses, and raises him as her own.

We are not told the extent to which Moses was aware of the plight of his people as he was growing up. But when he saw an Egyptian beating one of the Israelite slaves, he killed the Egyptian. Fleeing for his life, he took refuge in the wilderness among the people of Midian, where he met a tribal chieftain (Jethro), met the woman who would become his wife (Jethro's daughter Zipporah), and met his God. Seeing a bush ablaze but not consumed, Moses went to investigate and received the commission God had been preparing him to take up all his life—as the deliverer of Israel.

The purpose of Exodus is to explain how God revealed his presence and his power to his chosen people through the plagues and in their deliverance from Egypt. Just as in Genesis God overcame obstacles in establishing Abraham's family as his chosen people, in Exodus he overcomes obstacles that prevented him from dwelling in the midst of his people.

God guided and protected the Israelites through the wilderness and provided for them. At Sinai he told them how they needed to live so that his presence could dwell among them. Through the law, they learned how they were to honor and imitate his holiness. He told them how to build the



© Dr. James C. Martin

↑ *The Israelites passed through the Sinai Mountains on their way to the Promised Land.*

tabernacle and how the priesthood was to prepare so that God could take up residence with them. God had chosen the Israelites to be his people and he intended to reveal himself to them and to the world by living in their midst.

People to Know

Moses
Aaron
Miriam

Jethro
Zipporah

KEY VERSES:

Ex. 3:14: "I AM WHO I AM."

Ex. 14:31: "The Israelites saw the great power the LORD displayed."

Ex. 19:5–6: "If you obey me fully and keep my covenant, then out of all the nations you will be my treasured possession."

Ex. 40:34–35: "The glory of the LORD filled the tabernacle."

Key Teachings about God

- God demonstrates his power for his people and the world to see.
- God desires to live among his people.
- God delivers his people, and his ability to do so is without limit.
- God expects obedience from his people.
- God does not leave his people to guess what he expects of them.
- God chooses certain individuals and groups for special work.

↓ FROM EGYPT TO MOUNT SINAI

