

# “Exodus”

## Fall Series 1

### Lesson 1

## “Exodus 20:22-22:21”

**Objective:** To examine the account of the exodus from Egypt and to learn as much as we can about the nature of God, His mercy and what He desires for His creation. We will seek to do this by examining the historical background of the Exodus account, the interpretive history of Exodus amongst both Jewish and Christian scholars, where helpful. We will seek to understand the message of Exodus for us as Christians living in the 21st century American context.

**Materials:** The Bible, Ancient translations, Commentaries, both ancient and modern, Books, journal articles, dictionaries, the internet, and other resources as may be appropriate.

#### Procedures

1. To explore the message God of hope that the original audience will have understood from this text.
2. To understand how this text has inspired, challenged, and educated people down through the centuries guiding them not only in their personal lives, but the destinies of governments and nations.
3. We will seek to find out how these beliefs have played a role in the history of Christianity and how they continue to impact our existence and service to Jesus Christ today.
4. We will provide a sheet to take home as a reminder of what has been examined and to provide additional opportunities for consideration of these truths and their application in our daily living out of our eternal destiny beginning now. This sheet can be used as a discussion guide for small group discussion. We have several groups using this effectively.

As we come back to our study of Exodus, we begin at 20:22 and enter the next phase of the journey for God's people, Israel. This phase, in the story, is part of the covenant-making saga at the mountain of God, Sinai. The people of Israel have committed themselves to enter into covenant with YHWH (19:4-8). They are called into this covenant in obedience, they are called to "hear His voice," and "obey" (19:5). However, in the midst of God revealing His covenant to the people they are overwhelmed by the presence of God and His fearful presence. They, therefore, request that God not speak directly to them (20:19-21). God then appoints Moses to act as mediator. Moses now draws near to YHWH in order to receive the content of the Covenant (20:21) that will be made between God and Israel.<sup>1</sup>

The complex of laws given here (20:22-23:33) has traditionally been entitled the "The Book of the Covenant" in light of the reference at 24:32.<sup>3</sup> The Book of the Covenant is a very long

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<sup>1</sup> William Johnstone, *Exodus 20-24*, Smyth & Helwys Bible Commentary series (Macon GA: Smyth & Helwys Publishing Inc., 2014), p. 49

<sup>2</sup> **Moses came and told the people all the words of the LORD and all the ordinances; and all the people answered with one voice, and said, "All the words that the LORD has spoken we will do."** NRSV.

<sup>3</sup> Brevard S. Childs, *The Book of Exodus*, In The Old Testament Library series (Philadelphia PA: The Westminster Press, 1976), p. 451.

and complex collection. In the Hebrew, Masoretic text, this book is divided into an unusually large number of paragraphs, thirty-three in all, with some no longer than a single verse. The language of this section is the language of covenant making (compare it to a marriage ceremony). In this covenant, a divine-human code provides the framework for a largely inter-human set of rules that lies at the heart of this covenant. An added complexity in this section is that the law is divided into two types of ordinances and then these ordinances are presented in alternating blocks.<sup>4</sup>

- Exodus 21:2-3 illustrates the formulation for the first type of ordinance: “When you buy a male slave ... If he comes in ... married, then his wife shall go out with him.” This type of law will introduce a general situation by “When.” It will then qualify the general situation by giving a variety of possible circumstances using “If” clauses. In the end it will state the appropriate consequences, or penalties for breach of this ordinance. This type of ordinance occurs in two blocks, 21:2-11 and 21:18-22:17.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> William Johnstone, *Exodus 20-24*, pp. 49-50.

<sup>5</sup> William Johnstone, *Exodus 20-24*, p. 50.

- Exodus 21:12 then illustrates the second type of ordinance:

“Whoever strikes a person mortally shall be put to death.” The presentation here is in brief, and absolute terms, often using only one word in Hebrew to identify the wrongdoer and his crime. It denotes the crime, in principle, without any qualifications being given. The penalty in such instances is without mitigation (always the death penalty). This type of ordinance occurs in two blocks, 21:12-17 and 22:18-20.<sup>6</sup>

The Hebrew term for this first type of ordinance is מִשְׁפָּט - *Mishpat*. This Hebrew word implies “usual practice.” Precedent, or the usual way of dealing with things, and it provides the starting point for settling issues that are covered under such ordinances. The term for the second variety of law is חֻק - *Hoq* which is translated into English as “statute.” It has the meaning of “absolute requirement.” At Deuteronomy 5:31<sup>7</sup> Moses recalls that God revealed to Him “all the commandments, the statutes and the ordinances.” The assumption is this is highlighting exactly what we have here in God delivering these things to Moses at the

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<sup>6</sup> William Johnstone, *Exodus 20-24*, p. 50.

<sup>7</sup> “**But you, stand here by me, and I will tell you all the commandments, the statutes and the ordinances, that you shall teach them, so that they may do them in the land that I am giving them to possess.**” NRSV.

mountain in the variety of different forms.<sup>8</sup> Notice that there is nothing simple about the covenant ordinances, there is a great deal of complexity and detail.

In the Hebrew, Masoretic text, the thirty-three paragraphs in this section are divided into five major sections:

- 20:22-26;
- 21:1-27;
- 21:28-22:13;
- 22:14-24;
- 22:25-23:33.

This type of law code is not totally unique in the context of the Near East. In a similar vein, there is the famous Stela of Hammurabi (1728-1686 B.C), the sixth ruler of the First Dynasty of Babylon.<sup>9</sup> Why all of this background you may ask? There are several reasons. One of those reasons is that so often we flatten the complexity of Scripture to such a degree that it is seen in light of our own culture and our own time. We have no real reference points for understanding the making of covenants in the way that they did in their day. We need to understand that this is what is

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<sup>8</sup> William Johnstone, *Exodus 20-24*, pp. 50-52.

<sup>9</sup> William Johnstone, *Exodus 20-24*, pp. 53-55.

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happening here in the time of Moses and to know something about what this means is crucial to our understanding. Secondly, the giving of very sophisticated and detailed laws to one's people is not something that is unique, or unprecedented in the era of Moses or even before his time. This makes it clear that there is nothing here to suggest, that what we find in Exodus, in the giving of the Law is something not possible during this ancient time, or comes without earlier precedent. Some have suggested that this is indeed the case, therefore they reject that the story given here in Exodus represents an accurate historical account. As we examine history we understand that there is nothing in history that indicates that the sophistication of the people of this era could not, nor did not, produce such sophisticated law codes.

Exodus 20:22-26, the first section in the Book of the Covenant, provides us with the theological framework for this larger section. We then find its corresponding closing part at 23:10-19. These two sections then act as a frame for this Book of Covenant within what we call the larger Book of Exodus. We begin here with the commissioning of Moses, and with him carrying out this commission in 24:3-8. This intervening material comprises

the terms of the covenant. The people have asked Moses to act on their behalf (20:10); now Moses receives the commission to act also on YHWH's behalf from God Himself. Moses is at this point officially appointed as mediator of the covenant for the two parties.<sup>10</sup>

What does this mean? It will mean that Moses will act on the part of both parties adding things that will improve communication between both parties. This is important as we seek to interpret what is said here and may be in part what is reflected in the words of Jesus at Matthew 19:8 when the discussion of divorce came to the forefront. **Jesus replied, "Moses allowed you to divorce your wives because your hearts are unyielding. But it wasn't that way from the beginning."**<sup>11</sup> What this means is that interpreting Scripture requires us to be attentive to not only the words that are said, but also very carefully to focus on the intent of those words and the actual circumstances of their delivery. Jesus often challenged the religious leaders of His day with the true meaning of the meaning of Scripture.

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<sup>10</sup> William Johnstone, *Exodus 20-24*, p. 57.

<sup>11</sup> CEB.

What is the relationship between the Decalogue (The Ten Commandments) and what we have here in this section? The Decalogue provides the framework for what we have here in this section, while this section, or Book, provides the authorized exposition or interpretation of the Decalogue. This Book will vary from the Decalogue with remarkable freedom all the while remaining totally faithful to its contents and meaning. Below is a chart laying out a comparison between the two sections.

### **The Theological Framework of B (20:22-26; 23:10-19)**

20:22a—narrative identifying YHWH as speaker  
20:22b—YHWH’s opening Word, citing past action as ground for obedience: “You have seen [the same phrase as in 19:4a about the exodus] that I have spoken . . .”  
20:23a—“You shall not make . . . alongside me”  
20:23b—“Gods of silver . . . you shall not make . . .”  
20:24a—“An altar . . . you shall make for me . . .”  
20:24b—“Wherever I cause my name to be remembered . . .”  
20:25-26—“But if you make for me an altar of stone  
23:(10-)12 (14-19)—“. . . Six days you shall do your work...”(v.12)  
23:13b—“Do not invoke the names of other gods . . .”  
23:14-19—“Three times in the year you shall hold a festival for me...” The Decalogue (20:1-17)

### **The Decalogue (20:1-17)**

20:1—narrative identifying God as speaker  
20:2—I: YHWH’s opening Word, citing past action as ground for obedience: “I am the LORD your God, who brought you out...”  
20:3—IIa: “You shall have no other gods before me”  
20:4—IIb: “You shall not make for yourself an idol . . .”  
20:5-6—IIc: “You shall not . . . worship them . . .”  
20:7—III: “You shall not make wrongful use of the name of the LORD . . .”



cf. IIc

20:8-11—IV: "... Six days you shall labor ..." (v. 9)

cf. III

cf. IV<sup>12</sup>

It is the case that at verse 20:22 we have the beginning of a new speech between Moses and God. The injunction here regards not making idols and other altars follows upon the heels of the theophany of YHWH at 20:18-19. The people are terrified of God and this terror acts as motivation in verse 22 for not making any false gods, or improper altars.<sup>13</sup> The phrase "gods of gold" (verse 23b) occurs in the Hebrew Bible only here and in the Golden Calf narrative (Exodus 32:31) and this therefore links these two sections together. The plural, "gods," here is connected to the plural "gods" in Exodus 32:4, which then goes on to indicate a connection to the later apostasy of Jeroboam (1 Kings 12:28). This breach in the covenant, in the time of Jeroboam will lead directly to the exile of Israel (2 Kings 17:7-41).<sup>14</sup> This section in Exodus also speaks out against the temptation to build

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<sup>12</sup> William Johnstone, *Exodus 20-24*, p. 59.

<sup>13</sup> Peter Enns, *Exodus*, in The NIV Application Commentary series (Grand Rapids MI: Zondervan, 2000), p. 441.

<sup>14</sup> William Johnstone, *Exodus 20-24*, p. 60.

sumptuous temple complexes.<sup>15</sup> The worship of YHWH was to be simple and unadorned compared to the worship practices of the pagans.

The instructions with regard to making the altar is that they are to use only earth, or uncut stone. These instructions are both mysterious and perplexing which causes us to look again and to contemplate what this means. The most reasonable explanation, that I can find, for these stipulations is that they are anti-Canaanite stipulations. By building their altar in this manner they are making a definitive statement that the worship of YHWH is different from the worship of other people dwelling in proximity to Israel.<sup>16</sup> The issue of not exposing nakedness likely is involved with the fact that Near Eastern worship practices sometimes involved ritual nudity.<sup>17</sup> Israel was to be different from the people in the land that they were going to occupy. They were to stand out and to be set apart.

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<sup>15</sup> William H. C. Propp, *Exodus 19-40*, The Anchor Bible, Vol. 2A (New York NY: The Anchor Bible, 2006), p. 182.

<sup>16</sup> Peter Enns, *Exodus*, p. 442.

<sup>17</sup> Nahum Sarna, *Exodus*, in The JPS Torah Commentary series (Philadelphia PA: The Jewish Publication Society, 1991), p. 117.

Verse 24 is an interesting verse in that it speaks about sacrifices and their necessity. It should be noted that it is not that God needs the sacrifices, or that He requires them for His sustenance or to increase His power, wealth, or prestige. “The fourfold emphasis on the word *your* connotes as it were: Know that it is not I (God) who have need of sacrifices, but you alone require them, in order to express your feelings towards Me. The sacrifices are your sacrifices.”<sup>18</sup> Often people have asked me what the point of sacrifices were and are? In our world today, we are puzzled by the concept, but here in this verse we have clarification. Sacrifices are not something that God needs, why would He need anything from us. Sacrifices are something **we need** as a tangible expression of our trust in Him. We give of our valuable, and often hard-earned, resources as an expression that we trust more in God than in these things. This is also what we do today as we give of our money to the church. God has all the resources He will ever need. There is no universe of limited supply with God, and when we give, we express that we trust more in the universe of the unlimited supply that is God’s rather than in

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<sup>18</sup> U. Cassuto, trans. from the Hebrew by Israel Abrahams, *A Commentary on the Book of Exodus* (Jerusalem: The Magnes Press, The Hebrew University, 1987), pp. 255-256.

the universe of our current dwelling where there are always only limited resources. Offerings and sacrifices are acts of our faith and trust in YHWH that are tangible and real to us as humans beings trapped in flesh. Offerings are given as an expression of our hope and our longing to dwell in the presence and under the full authority and dominion of God.

Moving onto 21:1, we come to the ordinances (הַמִּשְׁפָּטִים - *The Mishpatim*) that God sets down in order to help His covenant people live in community with one another. Community is an essential element in being the chosen people of God. Even as these ordinances are set down they are not only about the community being able to get along with one another, they more importantly act as a direct expression of faith, of trust, in YHWH. Built into these ordinances are reminders of the sovereignty of YHWH with regulations regarding slavery being based on the system of creation with its six days and the seventh being sacred to God (21:2). The ordinances are intended to promote an understanding at the outset of what behaviors are expected so that there was a basis for cooperation, unity, and peace, in the community of YHWH's people. Their community rhythms are a

reflection of their faith and trust in God. They please God as a reflection of faith and trust, not at an intrinsic level.

At 21:5 there is an account that certainly jangles our modern sensibilities with its condoning of slavery. The Hebrew Bible permits slavery as a means of paying debt. Slavery is used for the paying of debt by the unpaid labor of an impoverished borrower who has no other means by which he might pay the debt he has accrued. Slavery is strictly limited as this text will make clear. It is the case that the Hebrew Bible does not have in view here “chattel slavery:” where a slave (who is a Hebrew) is a piece of property owned for life by a master with unrestricted power over that property. It was permitted for Gentiles to be owned in perpetual slavery such as when they were taken in war (Exodus 12:44; Leviticus 25:44-46; cf. Deuteronomy 20:11), those whom may be passed on as an inheritance to following generations (cf. Joshua 9:3-27; 1 Kings 9:20-22; cf. Ezra 2:65/Nehemiah 7:67).<sup>19</sup> It should be noticed that, perhaps in an effort soften the issue of slavery in the Hebrew Bible the word *eved* (עֶבֶד) is often

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<sup>19</sup> William Johnstone, *Exodus 20-24*, p. 76.

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translated as “servant” in our English Bibles. This is an incorrect translation here.

Again the focus is upon helping the Israelites to live in a cohesive community with an understanding of clear expectations of how they were deal with one another. It is interesting that at 21:5 there is an expression used of the “slave” loving the master and wanting to remain in slavery. The word used here for love in the Old Greek translation of the Hebrew Scriptures (the Septuagint) is the word *agapao* (ἀγαπάω) the verbal form of the familiar Greek word for love, *agape*. This is not a romantic, or brotherly love, but a love of commitment. In such an instance a person would then undergo a ceremony marking their commitment to serve as a slave for life because of their love for their master.

Throughout these ordinances the focus is over and over again upon helping the people of God to become a cohesive community that reflects the nature of God in a world that is marked by many aspects that we today find strange and uncivilized. However, in their day these things will have likely seemed strange because they were so progressive, precise, and

differed so much from the practices of the other people in this region. Though seemingly barbaric to us, these practices will have meant that the Jewish people would have been a beacon of civility and progress in a world marked, by darkness and cruelty.

As we come to 21:22 there is a passage that touches upon something that may press hard on the hearts of many in our nation. These verses have been seen as relevant in the ongoing discussions of abortion. These verses are extremely difficult and their translation is highly disputed. The main issue for us today though is that there seems to be a discrepancy between the way a woman is dealt with and the way her unborn child is dealt with. Some of the translations do not make this discrepancy clear as they give death as the penalty for both the child as well as the mother. Certainly it is the case that others do make a distinction between the penalty for the death of the mother and her unborn child. However, of critical importance in this discussion is that this difference in the value placed on one life as opposed to another is not without precedent in Exodus (Exodus 21:20-21; 21:26-27; 21:32).<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> Bernard S. Jackson, "The Problem of Exod. XXI 22-5 (lus talionis)," *Vetus Testamentum* 23:3 (1973), pp. 273-304. Robert N. Congdon, "Exodus 21:22-25 and the Abortion Debate," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 146 (1989), pp. 132-147.

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The reason this is an important issue is that this would mean that the questions and the issues addressed by this ancient Hebrew text are not directly applicable to our modern issue of abortion. The fact that these ancient people may, or may not have seen the unborn child as being as valuable as a fully developed human will not be answered by this passage decisively. That is a discussion for another time and place. It is clear that all human life is valued and considered important. There is to be found here no fodder for devaluing human life or for the promotion of abortion.

This section of Scripture is really about helping God's people to become a community of faith and order, that can function as a beacon of light in the darkness of the pagan world. Much may seem barbaric and strange to us today, but even the laws of Great Britain and the United States link back to these laws and ordinances given to the people of God so long ago. Their goal was to create "one" people who could serve as a light of justice and as a reflection of the unity and order to the "one" God, the creator of the universe.



# Synopsis

In this phase of our study we come to the next phase of the journey of God's people in becoming His coherent community.

This phase is still a part of the covenant-making part of this saga.

This section includes a complex list of ordinances and laws that build upon the previously delivered decalogue in a manner that explains and interprets the decalogue.

In this section, it is made clear that Moses is selected as the mediator on behalf of the people and on the behalf of God. In this role Moses will have been expected to mediate and make the covenant more understandable and workable for both parties in the covenant. Many of the ordinances in this section seem controversial and antiquated to our modern eyes, but we are seeing these things over three thousand years after their initiation and two thousand years after the advent of the changes initiated by Jesus Christ and His followers.

The ordinances given here are given in two sections: one giving regulations regarding community life and the remedy for breach of an ordinance. In the second section, there are also regulations regarding living in community, but in this section the

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punishment is almost always death to the perpetrator for breach of the regulation. Some modern scholars have indicated that they believe these regulations are too complex and detailed to have been given in the time of Moses. This is a minimalist perspective that is patently wrong as can be demonstrated by other law codes from even earlier than this period that are equally complex and detailed.

This section provides us with much that can help us understand what it means to live as a community of God even though it was written many centuries ago. We also have here some information regarding that perhaps shed some light on the words of Jesus in Matthew 19:8 regarding Moses allowing things that were not the original intent of God. The role of a mediator is to make agreements that are altered by both parties. Israel is to be a people that stands apart from the other nations that live around them. They are to be unique and distinct. Emphasis is over and over again focused upon the people of Israel becoming a community devoted to God in order to function as a beacon of light for the world.

# Questions

1. Why do you think it is important for the people of God to “fear” Him?
2. What role does a mediator serve between two parties?
3. Do you think that a mediator changes the documents produced under mediation? In what ways?
4. How do rules and laws aid in creating unity and order within a community?
5. In what ways do you see the rules given here as a reflection of the nature of God?
6. Why do you think this section specifically mentions the making of gods of silver and gold?
7. What purpose do you see sacrifices serving among the people of God?
8. Do you think that there is a reason that God needs our sacrifices and offerings?
9. What are some ways that you see offerings as a reflection of the faith of the giver?
10. Why do you think God chooses to make ordinances that keep worship to him from being ornate and sophisticated?
11. How do we see God guiding His people into faith in the regulations regarding slaves?
12. Why do you think the penalty for breaking the ordinances of God incur the death penalty so often?
13. How does the issue of premeditation affect the outcome of sentencing in these ordinances?

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14. How does the issue of intent affect the outcome of sentencing?
  15. Do you think the concept of an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth reflects justice? Why, or why not?
  16. How does unintentionally committing a crime affect sentencing?
  17. What can we learn about the nature of God and what He desires for His people from these verses?
  18. What can we learn about living together as God's community today from these verses?

# To Take Home

## **What is Important to know?**

It is important to know that not everything in Scripture is simple and easy, even for the original audience. The fact that Scripture is written in a different language, in a different era, to a different culture to a unique people compounds the complexity of Scripture for us today. In order for us to properly interpret Scripture it is necessary for us to consider these matters. What are some ways that you would go about dealing with these complexities in your study of Scripture?

## **Where is God in these words?**

God is in these Scriptures creating for Himself a people that could fulfill His purposes of redeeming His good creation. God seems intent upon drawing distinctions between the people following Him and those that do not. They are to be a people that are distinct and different from the other cultures around them. They are also called to be distinct in their community that expresses the harmony and enlightened morality of a people touched by YHWH. What are some ways that these Scriptures teach us about the nature of God?

## **What does any of this mean for how I live my life?**

The words in this section called the people of ancient Israel to be the unique and special people of God called to His purposes. Their behavior was to be altered by their contact with God as they sought to fulfill His will for their lives. They were not simply called to have the right beliefs, they were called to have the right actions, attitudes, and community. All of these factors are an important part of God's plan for His people. The covenant that God makes with Israel was given as a result of promises made to Abraham, the progenitor of this people who had now become numerous and were being formed into a nation before they had any land to call their own. What do you think we can learn from this section that helps us to live as God's Holy community today?

## **What is the word of God calling us to do?**

As we examine each section of Scripture we need to ask what God was calling His original audience to do and to become. This is a part of the process, but then we must ask what these Scriptures mean for us today on this side of the cross. Much has changed and the message of Jesus has greatly altered our modern world, but there is still more that needs to be done to redeem creation. What from these words calls to your heart today as you seek to live as a part of the community of God?