

# OUT OF EGYPT

A Lenten Reflection on the Exodus and the Spiritual Life

**“It shall serve for you as a sign . . .”**

Introduction to the Exodus and Interpreting the Scriptures

## The Exodus and the Bible

- “Exodus” is the Latin form of a Greek word meaning “departure”
  - εἶ / ex — “out”
  - ὁδός / hodos — “road”
  - usually refers to the historical event, centered on the person of Moses, who leads the people on the “road out” of Egypt
- The Books of Moses
  - Moses is traditionally considered the author of the first five books of the Bible
    - Genesis (the Beginning)
    - Exodus (the Departure)
    - Leviticus (instructions for the Levites)
    - Numbers (the Census)
    - Deuteronomy (the Second Law)
  - taken as a unit they are called
    - the Pentateuch (Greek: five books)
    - the Torah (Hebrew: the Law)
  - Moses makes his appearance in the Book of Exodus
  - the story begins much earlier
    - Gen 15:13–18: “Know for certain that your descendants shall be aliens in a land not their own . . . To your descendants I will give this land.”
    - this shows God’s providence and his faithfulness to the Covenant
- the Exodus becomes the pivotal event in Israel’s history
  - a reason for encouragement (Joshua 24:2–14; Isaiah 41:4–10)
  - a motive for trusting in the Lord (2 Samuel 7:22–23; Jeremiah 32:17–22)
  - a fact that holds Israel accountable (Micah 6:1–4; Hosea 9:1–3; 11:1–5)
  - a subject for praising God in song (Ezra 3:10–11; Pss 66, 78, 105, 135, 136)
- the rituals of the Covenant are all connected with events of the Exodus
  - the Feast of Passover (Exodus 13)
  - the Feast of Weeks (Pentecost) (Exodus 19; Deuteronomy 16)
  - the Feast of Booths (Leviticus 23)
  - the Consecration of the Firstborn (Exodus 13)

- God promised Moses that he would send “another prophet” (Deuteronomy 18:15)
  - this “new Moses” is Jesus Christ (cf. Acts 3:12ff.)
  - aspects of his life and teaching reflect this
    - the Flight into Egypt (Matthew 2:13–15)
    - the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5:1)
    - the Bread from Heaven (John 6)
- the multi-faceted use of the Exodus in the Scripture reminds us of the importance of interpretation

## The Senses of Scripture

- traditionally, interpreters distinguish various senses by which the text is understood
  - the literal sense
    - directly expressed by the human author
    - also intended by God who inspires
    - made clear with help of history, archeology, linguistics, etc.
  - the spiritual sense
    - becomes clear when the texts are read in the context of the Paschal Mystery of Christ
    - meditation/interpretation arrives at three kinds of insights:
      - **the allegorical sense:** events and persons in the Old Testament take on symbolic meaning referring to Christ and the Christian
      - **the moral sense:** draw instruction for Christian living from the experiences and behavior (good and bad) of biblical personages
      - **the anagogical sense** (from Greek for “leading”): the Scriptural events that happened on Earth point us to our true home in Heaven
  - this four-sense approach is seen even in the New Testament itself  
1 Corinthians 10 contains St Paul’s interpretation of the Exodus according to these various senses
- the literal sense and the spiritual sense(s) always are connected to each other
- the most deliberate proponents of the spiritual sense are the Fathers of the Church
  - the Holy Spirit who inspires the Scriptural authors likewise guides the teacher of the Church in the work of interpretation
  - the homilies and commentaries of the Fathers are still foundational to interpreting the Scripture according to “the mind of the Church”
  - two Fathers are pre-eminent in the interpretation of the Exodus
    - Origen (c. 185–254)
      - catechist in Alexandria, Egypt; later ordained priest
      - had a deep desire for martyrdom his whole life
      - most of his 786 works are lost
      - of the 180 homilies that survive, 73 are on the Pentateuch
    - Saint Gregory of Nyssa (335–394)
      - bishop of Nyssa in Cappadocia (modern Turkey)
      - composed *The Life of Moses* as a guide to the spiritual life

## The Historical Situation of Moses and the Israelites

- the Egyptian Empire
  - the “New Kingdom” lasted from about 1570–1070 B.C
  - at its height it extended as far south as Nubia and as far north as Canaan
    - provinces owed tribute to Egypt, in produce, precious metals and slaves
    - provinces depended on Egypt for assistance in time of famine or disaster
- “So Israel came into Egypt . . .” (Psalm 105:23)
  - around 1700 B.C., Joseph, 11th son of Jacob, is sold into slavery by his brothers
  - after incarceration in Egypt, he impresses Pharaoh with his divinely-given abilities to interpret dreams, and is made viceroy of the kingdom
  - Joseph and Jacob see this as part of God’s plan (Genesis 43; 46:1–4)
    - his brothers come to Egypt for food and are reunited with him
    - Pharaoh invites Jacob to bring the whole family to Egypt, and gives them fertile land in Goshen in which to settle (Genesis 45–47)
- after the death of Joseph, the people multiply in the land (Exodus 1:5–8)
  - this is the beginning of interpretations that equate “our Joseph” with Christ
- “A king who knew nothing of Joseph” (Exodus 1:8)
  - most likely Ramesses II (born 1303 B.C.), greatest Pharaoh of the New Kingdom
    - ruled over Egypt for 66 years (1279–13); known as the “Great Ancestor”
    - rapid building projects: monuments, tombs and supply cities in Goshen
  - fears the rapidly-multiplying Israelites and oppresses them with hard labor
    - “forgetting Joseph” ≈ neglecting faith and the wisdom of Christ
    - leads to oppression by the Devil (≈ Pharaoh) and the vices of the flesh
    - rejection of Christ leads to the dominion of the Devil
      - this dominion—concupiscence—is a result of the Original Sin
      - we are set free by Baptism, and conquer concupiscence by grace
- “It is is a boy, kill him . . .” (Exodus 1:15–22)
  - the birth of the virtues in us (≈ the newborn boys) frightens the Devil
  - to protect the virtues from being suffocated in the turmoil of temptation and the distractions of daily life (≈ the River), we should keep our good works secret
- the birth of Moses
  - after hiding the child for three months, his mother places him in a basket
    - the same word (טֶבַח / tebat) is used for this basket and for the ark of Noah
    - shows God’s plan at work as he continues to save his people from evil
    - the ark is a symbol of education in the virtues and formation of conscience, which protect us from the rushing waters of temptation
  - Pharaoh’s daughter “draws out” Moses from the water
    - Moses (מֹשֶׁה / moshe) sounds like the Hebrew for “I drew him out” (מִשִּׁיתֵהוּ / meshitfhu)
    - Pharaoh’s daughter symbolizes the soul set free from the sins and impiety of the Devil and the evil world (≈ Pharaoh and his household) and cleansed in the water of baptism
    - the “drawing out” signifies the conscious choice to accept God’s grace
    - Origen: “Let us take the Law of God [≈ Moses] to ourselves” so that it can grow in our household (the soul) and give us life in abundance