

EXODUS - JOURNEY TO FREEDOM

The descendants of Jacob had taken refuge in Egypt during a great famine, but they stayed on long after it was over. Joseph, their protector, died, and there was a change of government. Soon their growing numbers threatened the balance of population, and the Egyptian king decided on a primitive form of birth control, getting rid of all male children that were born. When this did not work, he enslaved the Israelites and used them on huge building projects as free labour.

It is an incontrovertible fact that all this was predicted in a prophecy made to Abraham hundreds of years previously (see Genesis 15 v 13, 14). The last part of the prophecy was also about to come true – God would deliver Abraham's people from bondage and take them back to the land they came from. The early chapters of the book of Exodus describe the amazing story of **Moses**. This man, the chosen deliverer, was born in a slave camp, yet brought up as the son of a princess. Exiled for forty years, he was commissioned by the angel of God at the burning bush to go back to Egypt to deliver the Israelites from the grip of the Egyptians. The **Ten Plagues** (disasters) grow in intensity as stubborn Pharaoh refuses to humble himself before Israel's God. They make gripping reading in Exodus chapters 7 to 12. The last plague had a resonance that lasts until today. The death of the Firstborn of Egypt, and the deliverance of the Israelites who were protected by the sprinkled blood of the **Passover lamb** on their doors, is commemorated annually by Jews all over the world. The New Testament is going to remind us that Jesus is our Passover lamb. His blood on the cross delivers us from the power of death.

Once out of Egypt and delivered from the Egyptians for the last time at the Red Sea (chapter 14 describes this amazing escape from death), the Israelites began a long journey that would slowly weld them into a nation. They spent a whole year at the foot of **Mount Sinai** in the Negev desert. Their food was provided each day in the form of **manna**, a complete diet in granular form that fell around the camp each night. In addition, abundant water came from a rock, which Moses was told to strike with his shepherd's rod. Later, in the gospel of John, Jesus will liken himself to this miraculous bread from heaven, and to the smitten rock, which gave the water of life.

Two important things happened in this period. Firstly, as recorded in chapters 19 to 24, the Israelites agreed to obey the laws and statutes summarised in the **Ten Commandments**. In return, God promised He would be their God. This solemn agreement, known in the Bible as a **Covenant**, was sealed after the custom of the times by the sprinkling of blood. Sadly, their early enthusiasm to serve their God was marred by a lapse into the worship of a **Golden Calf** (see chapter 32) while Moses was away on the mountain. This was only one of their many rebellions against the God who had given them freedom and hope.

Secondly, Moses delivered to them very detailed instructions for constructing a portable **Tabernacle** (tent) fenced in by curtains, in which God would be worshipped through the chosen priests from the tribe of Levi. This was constructed from materials donated by the people themselves. The description is given in chapters 35 to 40. At the heart of the Tabernacle were two rooms. The outer one had a golden lampstand, a table with bread and wine, and an altar for incense. This represented our mortal life, as we journey to the Kingdom of God. The inner sanctuary contained only the Ark. This was a golden box containing the Ten Commandments. It was topped with a solid gold lid on which were fashioned cherubims (symbolic creatures with wings) over which the glory of God shone in a fiery cloud to indicate his presence in the midst of his people.

The record of the wilderness journey continues in the book of Numbers, but meanwhile our attention is drawn to Leviticus, a handbook for the priests.