**Exodus Commentary**

**Exodus Chapter 1**

Exd 1:1

**“the names of the children of Israel who came into Egypt.”** This opening line in Exodus connects the Exodus account with Genesis, and especially the patriarchs in Genesis: Abraham, Isaac, and “Israel” (Jacob). A more complete list is in Genesis 46:8-27.

Exd 1:5

**“thigh.”** An idiom. The “thigh” is euphemistic for the genital organs, and the idiom “came out of his thigh” refers to his direct descendants (see commentary on Gen. 24:2).

[For more information on sexual euphemisms, see commentary on Isa. 47:2.]

**“70 souls.”** Exodus 1:5 is a summary statement, and the number 70 is not exact, but is representative. The numbers are laid out more clearly in Genesis 46:8-27 (see commentary on Gen. 46:27), and there Jacob is part of the 70. Deuteronomy 10:22 is also a summary statement that says “70.”

Exd 1:7

**“land.”** The translation is more “earth” than “land,” and that the “earth was filled with them” is a hyperbole.

**“multiplied.”** God’s design for people and animals was that they would multiply and fill the earth (cf. Gen. 1:22, 28). However, this multiplication applied specifically to God's chosen people, Israel. We would expect them to multiply before they were oppressed as Exodus 1:7 says. However, the blessing of God is clearly upon Israel and shows up because they multiply even while being oppressed (Exod. 1:12). This was a fulfillment of God’s promise to Abraham (Gen. 12:2; 13:16; 15:5).

**“strong.”** The Israelites were not strong in a military sense, but in number, which translated into strength.

Exd 1:8

**“a new king arose over Egypt.”** Exodus used the word “king” here (*melekh*; #04428 מֶלֶךְ), not “Pharaoh.” Furthermore, this pharaoh is not named even one time in the Exodus record or anywhere else in the Bible. That fact shows us that Pharaoh, although he was a real person, is being used as a type of ungodly leaders. We learn from studying him what ungodly leaders are like. The characteristics that we see in Pharaoh are the same characteristics that show up century after century in ungodly leaders.

Thomas J. White writes, “...human beings are also capable of wanting to be like God in ways that transcend the authentic scope of their nature and that are morally distended and unjust.”[[1]](#footnote-25468) We see that desire to be like God in Pharaoh in that he thought he had the right to lord it over other free people, enslave, and mistreat them.

Exd 1:9

**“too many and too strong for us.”** Scholars assert that Israel could not have outnumbered the people of Egypt, so this is almost certainly an exaggeration that comes from fear and a desire to control.[[2]](#footnote-15435) Some scholars believe Pharaoh was making an excuse to enslave Israel. George Bush suggests that perhaps Pharaoh had a specific area in mind in which Israel was more numerous than the Egyptians.[[3]](#footnote-11081) In any case, there were not more Israelites than Egyptians in Egypt, and Pharaoh did apparently want to enslave them or he would have just asked them to leave Egypt, and when they did want to leave he would not let them go. It is also possible that the Hebrew text should be understood as, “too many and too mighty for us” (ESV, JPS, RSV; cf. CJB, NIV, Rotherham, The Interpreter’s Bible), which would be a statement made from fear, but not as clearly an exaggeration.

Exd 1:10

**“wisely.”** The Hebrew is *chakam* (#02449 חָכַם), and it is a common word for wisdom, to be wise. The Bible makes a distinction between godly wisdom (1 Cor. 1:21) and “worldly wisdom” (1 Cor. 1:20; 3:19). Worldly wisdom may succeed for a while on earth but in the end, it will fail; at the Judgment if not before then.

Exd 1:11

**“oppress.”** The Hebrew is *anah* (#06031 עָנָה), and it means to make someone busy with something; oppress; afflict to be bowed down or put down; made low; made humble; depressed; downcast. Thus, the NLT has “to wear them down.” Pharaoh was worldly wise. The slave drivers did not just give the Israelites work to do, they oppressed them, wore them down, and worked to break their spirits. No wonder Egypt was called “the iron furnace” (Deut. 4:20; Jer. 11:4) and the “house of bondage” (Deut. 5:6; 6:12; Josh. 24:17 KJV).

Exd 1:12

**“the *Egyptians*.”** The Hebrew text simply reads “they,” but to avoid confusion, the word “Egyptians” is supplied for clarity.

**“dread.”** The Hebrew word has two meanings: “dread” and “dislike, loathing.” In this case, both meanings apply. The CEB conflates the text and reads, “the Egyptians started to look at the Israelites with disgust and dread,” and that catches the meaning of the text well.

Exd 1:14

**“serve as slaves.”** The Hebrew is *abad* (#05647 עָבַד) and it means to serve, to work, to serve another. In this context it means to serve as a slave (cf. ESV).

Exd 1:17

**“did not do what the king of Egypt commanded them.”** For more on civil disobedience, see commentary on Exodus 1:19.

Exd 1:19

**“and give birth before the midwife comes to them.”** This statement is a lie, an untruth. It has been debated for generations as to whether telling a lie is always wrong or whether there are times when telling a lie is acceptable to God. The philosopher Immanuel Kant believed that telling a lie was always wrong, while the Christian pastor and philosopher Dietrich Bonhoeffer believed that God supported people telling lies in certain situations. The biblical evidence is that Bonhoeffer was correct. God has always allowed people to defend themselves, their families, and other people. Self-defense is a basic tenet of God’s justice and biblical truth. For example, the general biblical tenet is to not kill, but killing is allowed if that killing is in self-defense. It would be incongruous for God to allow for killing in self-defense but not allow a person to lie in self-defense in order to defend their life or the lives of others. There are many times when evil governments would kill good people, such as we see here in Egypt, and those good people are often saved by untruths that people tell to the government or its representatives.

There are quite a few records in the Bible of people telling untruths to protect themselves or others. Here in Exodus 1:15-20 is the record of the Hebrew midwives. In Joshua 2:1-6 is the record of Rahab telling an untruth to the leaders of Jericho, who would have killed the men from Israel if they had found them, and she was blessed by God, marrying into the genealogy of Jesus Christ and being personally mentioned in Matthew 1:5. In 1 Samuel 19:11-18, David’s wife Michal lied to King Saul to save David’s life then her own. In 2 Samuel 17:15-20, a woman lied to the men of Absalom about young men who were hiding in her well and in so doing likely saved David’s life. In Genesis 38:11-19, Tamar acted out a lie and pretended to be a prostitute in order to avoid being kept from marrying and having the blessing of children by her selfish stepfather Judah, and God blessed her with a child in the genealogy of Jesus Christ and she herself is mentioned in Matthew 1:3. There are other records besides these where people misrepresented the truth to evil governments and leaders, and did so without any condemnation from God. In fact, in this record in Exodus, the Bible is very clear that the midwives who lied to Pharaoh were blessed by God: “And because the midwives feared God, he gave them families” (Exod. 1:21).

Civil disobedience to protect one’s life and the lives of others is throughout the Bible because evil governments are throughout the Bible and history. Moses’ parents hid him when he was born rather than kill him like Pharaoh ordered (Exod. 2:1-2). When Jezebel was killing the prophets of Yahweh, the palace administrator Obadiah hid 100 of the prophets and saved their lives (1 Kings 18:1-4). The apostles defied their evil Jewish government and continued to spread the word about Jesus even though they had been ordered not to speak about him (Acts 5:27-32).

Misrepresenting the truth to one’s government is serious, and it is an individual matter and an individual decision, and there are no “blanket policies” that cover every situation. But Scripture is clear that lying in self-defense can be acceptable to God in certain situations.

Exd 1:21

**“for them.”** That is, for the Israelites. The “them” is masculine, and refers to the Israelites, not the midwives. Exodus 1:20 and 1:21 should be one sentence, not two. The record of the midwives in Exodus is a great example of how a small group of people can bring a blessing upon an entire nation. The midwives feared God, and would not kill the baby boys, and that resulted in the nation of Israel continuing to build its numbers and its strength.

Exd 1:22

**“the Nile.”** The Hebrew text has “Nile.”

**Exodus Chapter 2**

Exd 2:2

**“that he was good.”** The literal meaning of the words in the Hebrew text of Exodus 2:2 is not debated. Moses is said to be *tov* (#02896 טוֹב), which means “good.”

What is debated by scholars is what “good” means in this context. Some commentators say it means “healthy” or “robust” (cf. NET). But M. Kalisch correctly writes: “Rashbam [Rabbi Shmuel Ben Meir] justly refutes the usual translation…“goodly child”…for Jochebed, the mother, would have been perfectly as anxious for the preservation of her child, had it been less fine or less strong. That interpretation would, indeed, almost remind us of the barbarous custom of the Spartans, who killed their children if they did not appear to them sufficiently robust (Plut. *Life of Lycurgus*).”[[4]](#footnote-32467)

Other commentators say *tov* means “beautiful” here in Exodus 2:2, but the same objection should be made to the translation “beautiful” (cf. CSB, NASB) as was made about “healthy.” Every baby is beautiful to the mother, and that is as it should be. If all Exodus is saying is that Amram and Jochebed, Moses’ parents (Exod. 6:20), saved Moses because he was “healthy” or “beautiful” they surely would have been afraid of being found out. But Hebrews 11:23 says they were not afraid, and that was because they were acting upon guidance from God.

Exodus 2:2 is a place where spiritual discernment and a knowledge of God’s plan should be brought into consideration for the understanding and translation of the Hebrew text, especially because the New Testament adds information to the Old Testament that would have been in the mind of Amram and Jochebed. The NLT translates Exodus 2:2 as “a special baby,” and that catches the sense of the verse. Moses was special because God said he was.

Stephen read the record of Moses’ birth and said that Moses was “beautiful before God” (Acts 7:20). Stephen was not translating the Hebrew text, rather he was giving the meaning of the text. Reflecting Stephen’s interpretation back into the Old Testament, we should realize that Amram and Jochebed knew the things that Stephen knew, which was that Moses was special (“good”) to God, and that is why they risked their lives to hide him.

At the birth of Moses, the Israelites were in slavery in Egypt and were looking for a deliverer. Hundreds of years before Moses was born, God told Abraham that He would bring the Israelites out of Egypt in the fourth generation of their being there (Gen. 15:16). Now, with the birth of Amram’s children, Miriam, Aaron, and Moses, the fourth generation had been reached. The four generations who were in Egypt were Levi (Joseph’s half-brother), Kohath, Amram, and Moses (Gen. 46:11; Num. 26:58-59; 1 Chron. 6:1-3). Given that the fourth generation had arrived, it should not surprise us that God—who acts to bring His promises to pass—would have acted in some way to bring His words to pass. We should note that from a fleshly perspective, there is no reason that Amram and Jochebed would have believed that their second son would be the way God would bring the Israelites out of Egypt. God said “fourth generation” to Abraham, and Joseph spoke of the deliverance coming (Gen. 50:24), but there was no prophecy about how that was going to be accomplished. So the most logical way that Amram and Jochebed knew to protect Moses and that he was special to God was that God spoke to them in some way about Moses and it was at that point that Jochebed saw that Moses was special and “beautiful to God.”

Hebrews 11:23 confirms that Amram and Jochebed knew from God that Moses was special. To best understand Hebrews 11:23 it is important to realize that Hebrews chapter 11 is about people who heard from God or knew what God had said and obeyed Him. They acted “by trust” (“by faith”) on the words of God. This was the case with Abel (Heb. 11:4), Enoch (Heb. 11:5), Noah (Heb. 11:7), Abraham (Heb. 11:8, 17), Isaac (Heb. 11:20), Jacob (Heb. 11:21), Joseph (Heb. 11:22), and with Amram and Jochebed (Heb. 11:23). All those people acted “by trust,” which means they trusted God and acted on what He said. Guidance from God is why Amram and Jochebed hid Moses instead of killing him, and their trust in the guidance of God is why they defied Pharaoh’s command and how they could do that and yet “they were not afraid of the king’s [Pharaoh’s] commandment” (Heb. 11:23). To say that Amram and Jochebed kept Moses alive and hid him and were not afraid of Pharaoh’s command simply because Moses was “healthy” or “beautiful” misses the mark. It misses God’s love for Israel and that He kept His promise and acted “in the fourth generation,” which is when He said He would act; it misses the interaction between God and Moses’ parents such that they understood how special Moses was; and it misses how committed to God Amram and Jochebed were that they listened to Him and then acted “by trust” on what He said.

Exd 2:3

**“a papyrus ark.”** This is the same Hebrew word as in Noah’s ark (see commentary on Exod. 2:5).

**“bitumen.”** For more information on bitumen, see commentary on Genesis 11:3.

**“laid it in the reeds by the river’s bank.”** Moses’ mother did not float Moses in a basket down the Nile like many stories and movies portray. Moses’ mother knew that the only chance for his survival was if he were found and pitied by a member of the royal family, so she used great care and wisdom when placing Moses in the reeds at the bank of the Nile. The point was not to hide Moses, the point was to have him found by the right people; which thankfully is what happened.

This should be a great lesson for us. Too many people think that “God is in control” and we can just roll the dice and let God determine the outcome. Thankfully, Moses’ mother did not think or act that way, or she would have floated Moses to his death, perhaps in the gut of some Nile crocodile. God is not “in control” in the way many people think He is. Furthermore, God says, “Wisdom is the principal thing” (Prov. 4:7 KJV). If we want to be successful in life we have to use wisdom, make deliberate decisions, and take decisive action. Moses’ mother also had Miriam watch over Moses, because if he was not quickly found he would need to be fed. God’s people need to be like Moses’ mother: make a bold, wise plan, and be deliberate and decisive in carrying it out.

Exd 2:4

**“his sister.”** Moses’ sister was Miriam.

**“to know what would be done to him.”** This would have been a tense moment. Whoever found Moses might well have just thrown him into the Nile as Pharaoh had ordered.

Exd 2:5

**“bathe at the Nile.”** It is unlikely that Pharaoh’s daughter would bathe in the Nile River itself, because the Nile is always changing and could well be dangerous because of currents and the wildlife that lives there. It is much more likely that the Egyptians had carved out a place close to the Nile more like a large swimming pool where Pharaoh’s household could bathe.

**“ark.”** Baby Moses was placed in an “ark,” the same Hebrew word as Noah’s ark, but different from the “ark of the covenant.” Just as Noah’s ark saved humankind, Moses’ ark will eventually lead to the establishment and salvation of Israel.

**“among the reeds.”** The ark with baby Moses was not floating down the Nile, it was specifically placed among the reeds where someone would see it (cf. Exod. 2:3).

Exd 2:6

**“child.”** The Hebrew noun is masculine, and since children are either male or female, since the word is masculine it refers to a boy. If the child had been a girl the noun would have been feminine.

**“boy.”** The Hebrew word puts an emphasis on the gender of the child.

**“children.”** The Hebrew noun is masculine, making it clear that the child was a boy.

Exd 2:7

**“his sister said to Pharaoh’s daughter.”** Moses’ sister Miriam was able to approach Pharaoh’s daughter. The Bible does not say why; it is possible that it was due to Miriam’s young age, and/or to God acting in the situation.

**“Should I go and call for you a woman who is nursing from among the Hebrew women.”** This would not have seemed strange to Pharaoh’s daughter because many women had had their baby boys killed due to Pharaoh’s decree to kill the male babies, so many women would have been producing milk but not had babies to feed. Some English versions use the phrase “wet-nurse, which is an older term for a woman who is lactating and can nurse a baby (cf. Darby, NEB70, REB). Other English versions just say “nurse,” but the term “nurse” today is used of a professionally trained person who helps the sick, not a nursing mother.

Exd 2:8

**“and called the child’s mother.”** It is an amazing miracle of God that Jochebed, Moses’ mother, got to nurse Moses until he was weaned. Moses could not have had a healthier early childhood.

Exd 2:9

**“and I will give you your wages.”** A mother’s love is such that Jochebed would have paid any amount of money she had to get to nurse her own baby, and yet in the grace of God she gets paid to do what she would have gladly paid to do. Furthermore, she no doubt had other benefits because Pharaoh’s daughter no doubt would have made sure the baby had royal protection and other needs met as well.

Exd 2:10

**“And the child grew.”** Moses would have been taken into Pharaoh’s house after he was weaned. Weaning was done late in the ancient world, sometimes as old as five, but that is unlikely here. Three years old is more probable.

**“she brought him to Pharaoh’s daughter.”** There is so much heart, emotion, hope, and commitment in this short and unassuming phrase in Exodus 2:10. Pharaoh’s daughter had no idea that the woman who had been nursing the baby for likely at least three years (nursing went on much longer in the biblical culture than it does in ours today) was the baby’s real mother, Jochebed (Exod. 6:20). But now it was time for Jochebed to trust the revelation she received about Moses when he was born, which is why she had determined to hide him from Pharaoh’s death command. Now Moses was older, and so Jochebed “brought him to Pharaoh’s daughter,” perhaps to never see him again, hoping and praying that he would be the one to deliver Israel from slavery in Egypt.

The Bible never says Moses ever saw his parents again. He stayed in Pharaoh’s house for 40 years, then went to “see” his fellow Hebrews, but very quickly ended up fleeing for his life from Egypt and living in the land of Midian, where he stayed another 40 years before returning to Egypt. Given the difficulties of the hard bondage in Egypt, it is probable that his parents died during that 80-year period.

What a sterling example of a true believer Jochebed is to us! Life is full of difficult choices, and few people handle them as well as Jochebed did. She could not let on she was Moses’ mother; she could not ask for visitation rights; she could not run away with the baby. It is likely that she cried herself to sleep for many nights missing her lovely boy, and she no doubt spent much time in prayer, likely with her husband Amram too, praying that their boy would be treated well in Pharaoh’s house and would get the training he needed to be the one to deliver Israel.

As the years went by and Moses passed age 20, then 25, then 30, if Jochebed and Amram were still alive, it is likely that they said to each other, “Maybe this will be the year we go free.” Alas, it was not until Moses was 80 that he came to deliver Israel, and since the Bible mentions both Moses’ older sister Miriam and his older brother Aaron, but never mentions his parents, it is likely they had both passed away by the time he returned to Egypt.

Handling life’s difficulties in a godly way is not “natural” and never easy. It is the result of years of working to be Christ-like and many times of self-examination. God gave us examples like Jochebed, so we know it can be done.

**“and he became her son.”** There is no mention in the text of a formal adoption process, and there likely was none. But the fact that the Bible says, “and he became her son” tells us that he was taken into the royal household as an equal.

**“Moses.”** The meaning of Moses is “He-who-pulls-out.”[[5]](#footnote-32458) The name is part of other Egyptian names as well. The name also seems to fit Moses’ destiny, that he “pulled out” the people of Israel from Egypt. The phrase, “of the water” is commentary, but not technically part of the name “Moses.” We know of other Egyptian names that have “mose” as part of it, e.g., Thutmose and Ramose.

Exd 2:11

**“when Moses had grown up.”** When he was 40 years old (Acts 7:23).

**“brothers.”** The word “brothers” is being used in the idiomatic sense, meaning one of his own people, a Hebrew.

**“forced labor.”** The Hebrews were slaves, so the work they did was forced labor.

**“striking.”** This is the same root word as in Exodus 2:12 when Moses “struck down” the Egyptian.

**“one of his brothers.”** By this time when Moses was 40 years old, he knew that his “brothers” were the Israelites. But the Bible does not tell us how he knew this.

Exd 2:12

**“struck down.”** The Hebrew is just the word “struck,” *nakhah* (#05221 נָכָה), but in this context, the word means to “strike down” or to kill. It is used that way often in Joshua and Judges (e.g., Josh 7:5; 8:21; Judges 3:29:31). The word “strike” is used several times in the context. The Hebrew does not tell us whether or not Moses intended to kill the Egyptian. It is possible that he did not intend to kill him but he died in the fight. It is quite likely that Moses, who was royalty, had some kind of weapon with him, even if it was only a staff. The Hebrew word is not the same as the word “kill.”

Exd 2:13

**“to him who was in the wrong.”** The Bible does not tell us how Moses knew who was wrong and who was right, but obviously, there had been discussion about it and the facts of the situation had become known.

**“fellow *Hebrew*.”** In this context, a “fellow,” was a fellow Israelite. For more on “fellow” see commentary on Leviticus 19:18. Although some translations use the word “neighbor” or “companion,” those terms give a meaning in English that is not in the text. The man may not have been a neighbor or companion, but he was a fellow Israelite.

Exd 2:14

**“Who made you a ruler and a judge over us?”** The man who was in the wrong responded in a way that is typical for people who are wrong but not humble and apologetic about it: he rejected Moses’ authority. People who are evil and are bullies are rarely humble about it. They already reject the moral and often civil law by their actions, so rejecting the authority of someone who represents the law is a natural reaction for them. God gave people free will, so there is no way to take that from them such that they behave in a godly manner unless they really want to change, which they rarely do. That is why the law must be strict and powerful. When Christ comes back, he will not try to reform the wicked—they are wicked. He will kill the wicked (e.g., Isa. 11:4; Matt. 25:41-46; Rev. 19:19-21). One of the reasons that the next life will be so different from this one, and so joyful, is that wicked people will not be there.

**“Surely this matter has become known!”** The man who Moses rescued from the Egyptian who was beating him no doubt went and told others how Moses, a man of the royal household, had rescued him and killed the Egyptian oppressor.

Exd 2:15

**“he sought to kill Moses.”** Much more could have been said here about Pharaoh than is in the text. When he heard that Moses had killed an Egyptian he likely felt greatly betrayed and was angry—furious! The Egyptians had extended every courtesy and privilege to Moses, and he responded by killing an Egyptian for beating a Hebrew slave, to them, hardly a valuable person in the kingdom. To the Egyptians, what Moses did was incomprehensible and inexcusable.

**“face.”** The Hebrew can be translated “face” or “presence.” Here “face” makes sense.

**“And he sat down by a well.”** Although the text does not specifically say that this event occurred when Moses first got to Midian, the flow of the text implies that. It seems that Moses, fleeing from the Egyptians, traveled into Midian and on his journey came to a well and sat down by it. The fact that Moses “sat down” implies that he stayed a while. and anyone familiar with the countryside understands why: it is hot, dry, and travel is difficult. Upon coming to a well of cool water, almost any traveler would sit and spend some time there.

Exd 2:17

**“Some shepherds.”** The Hebrew is more literally “the shepherds,” but, as the [NET text note](https://classic.net.bible.org/verse.php?book=Exo&chapter=2&verse=17&tab=commentaries) points out, this is the generic use of the definite article and should be understood as “some” in this context.

**“and drove them away.”** In the Hebrew text, the phrase “drove them away” is one word, *garash* (#01644 גָּרַשׁ), and it is masculine plural. This seems to clearly indicate that these seven women were accompanied by at least two men who would have been charged with protecting the girls. That a couple of men would have been with the girls fits with the ancient culture and custom. However, the men were not able to keep the shepherds from driving them all off and taking advantage of the water they had drawn. The rule of the open desert is a might-makes-right situation. That situation changed when Moses, 40 years old and well-trained in battle as any royal son would be, rose up and defended the girls from the shepherds.

**“saved them.”** The word “saved” is *yasha****ʿ*** (#03467 יָשַׁע), and no doubt it is purposely used here in Exodus 2:17. Forms of the word are used in many places, such as in the name “Jehoshua” (Joshua), “Yahweh saves.” Moses is destined to save (rescue, deliver) the disadvantaged and oppressed, and here he “saves” the daughters of the priest of Midian from oppressors just as he saved the Israelite who was being oppressed and will later save the Israelites from the oppressive slavery of Egypt. This event reveals more about the character of Moses. He could have just sat there and watched the shepherds bully the girls, but he was not that kind of person. He got involved to help the oppressed.

Exd 2:18

**“Reuel.”** “Reuel” is the family name of the father of Zipporah, Moses’ wife, and thus is the name of Moses’ father-in-law, while “Jethro” is the man’s priestly name (see commentary on Judg. 4:11).

**“How is it that you have come *home* so early today?”** The question seems to suggest that mistreatment at the hands of shepherds or others was a regular thing. If so, what a miserable life, knowing that regularly you would be mistreated and the efforts of your labor would be stolen from you! If that was indeed the case, there are many questions to ask, for example, why wouldn’t Reuel enlist more men to help the women so they would not be so mistreated? Or, why wouldn’t the women go at a different time of the day when the men were still working? It may well be that the women were continually afflicted by the shepherds until Moses came on the scene, and thus that these women were an illustration—a type—of the Israelites themselves, who were continually afflicted by the Egyptians until Moses went and saved them.

It is also possible, but seems much less likely, that Moses helped the women water the flock and get it home much earlier than usual.

Exd 2:19

**“drew, yes, drew.”** The Hebrew text uses the figure of speech polyptoton, doubling the verb for emphasis; the first is a qal infinitive and the second is a qal perfect (see commentary on Gen. 2:16).

Exd 2:20

**“Why is it that you have left the man?”** The question is more rhetorical than serious. The daughters would not have been free to invite a stranger, an Egyptian, into their father’s home without asking his permission, and he would have known that. Thus, Reuel’s question is actually an invitation to call the man to enjoy the hospitality of Reuel’s house, and the girls followed through with their father’s invitation.

Exd 2:21

**“Moses was willing to remain with the man.”** Moses agreed to live in the tent encampment of Jethro. As could be expected when marrying into a shepherd family, Moses became a shepherd.

Exd 2:23

**“And during that long period of time.”** Moses was a shepherd in Midian for forty years. He no doubt learned valuable life lessons in that time that he could not have learned as royalty in Egypt, lessons about hard work, long days, and dealing with the daily problems of life that royals would have just assigned to slaves. He did not know it while tending sheep, who tend to be stupid, but watching over the rebellious and recalcitrant Israelites was every bit as challenging, in fact, more challenging.

Exd 2:24

**“And God heard.”** Whatever made the timing right for God to act powerfully had now come to pass. Exodus 2:24-25 shows God interested and poised to act: “God heard...God remembered...God saw...God knew.” Then, in Exodus 3, God acts.

**“remembered.”** The word “remember” is used in the Semitic language in both a straightforward and idiomatic sense. Here it is used in the idiomatic sense, where “remember” means to pay attention to something and act. See commentary on Genesis 8:1.

**“his covenant with Abraham.”** God had made a covenant with Abraham to give him and his seed the Promised Land, but the Israelites had been in Egypt for over a century now (not 400 years; see commentary on Exod. 12:40). That God remembered His covenant with Abraham meant God had in mind to bring the Israelites out of Egypt and into the Promised Land.

Exd 2:25

**“and God knew.”** The word “know” is used in the Semitic language in both a straightforward and idiomatic sense. The exact nuance is determined by the context. Here in Exodus 2:25, it is used in the idiomatic sense, and “know” means to pay attention to something, plan, and act. In the previous verse, Exodus 2:24, the word “remembered” is used in an idiomatic sense.

The sentence breaks off, leaving us to wonder how God was going to act on His knowledge. When a sentence breaks of in mid-speech, it is the figure of speech aposiopesis, or “sudden silence.” The figure occurs when the speaker cuts off the sentence before it is completed, letting the audience complete the sentence in their mind.

That God “knew” the situation of the Israelites, and what He planned to do about it, shows the intimate relationship that God has with His people.

[For more on aposiopesis, see commentary on Luke 19:42.]

**Exodus Chapter 3**

Exd 3:1

**“Jethro, his father-in-law, the priest of Midian.”** “Jethro” is the priestly name of Reuel, the father-in-law of Moses (see commentary on Judg. 4:11).

**“and he led the flock to the west side of the wilderness.”** The biblical culture was oriented to the east. The Hebrew text more literally reads that Moses went “behind” the wilderness, which would mean the sunset or west side of the wilderness. In this context, it is not so much where any “wilderness” (desert) area ended, but where the territory of Midian ended.

It was not uncommon for shepherds to take their flock many miles from their home base. For example, Jacob’s sons traveled over 60 miles from home with their sheep (Gen. 37:17), and it is possible that Moses went at least that far. In 1855 Horatio B. Hackett wrote about the travel of shepherds that he encountered and heard about: “Another peculiarity of the desert is that, though the soil is sandy, it rarely consists, for successive days together, of mere sand; it is interspersed, at frequent intervals, with clumps of coarse grass and low shrubs, affording very good pasturage, not only for camels, the proper tenants of the desert, but for sheep and goats. The people of the villages on the borders of the desert are accustomed to lead forth their flocks to the pastures found there. … The shepherds not only frequent the parts of the desert near their places of abode, but go often to a considerable distance from them; they remain absent for weeks and months, only changing their station from time to time, as their wants in respect to water and herbage may require.[[6]](#footnote-15156)”

**“to the mountain of God.”** Here in Exodus 3:1, Mount Sinai is called the “mountain of God.” When Moses penned Exodus, Mount Sinai was well-known to be the mountain of God, but there is no evidence that it was known as the mountain of God before Moses encountered God there. So here in Exodus 3:1, the mountain is called the “mountain of God” so that the readers would know which mountain was being spoken about.

Exd 3:3

**“why the bush is not burning up.”** At this point, there was nothing special about the bush or the fire in the bush. What was special was that the bush was not burning up, and that caught Moses’ attention. There were several reasons a bush may catch fire in the wilderness. One of them is that the area has some quartz crystal that can act like a magnifying glass in the sunlight and catch the bush on fire. Notice that the fact that the bush was on fire was not what caught Moses’ attention; he did not say, “Wow. A burning bush. Never seen that before!” Gathering wood for the family fire in a place such as where Moses lived was no doubt a daily task and quite challenging, so if there was some kind of bush or wood that would burn a long time without burning up that would have been of particular interest to Moses, and he wanted to know more about it.

Exd 3:4

**“God called to him out of the midst of the bush.”** We learned in Exodus 3:2 that it was an angel who appeared to Moses. Yet this verse says “God called.” God called via His agent, the angel. It often occurs in Scripture that God acts through his agents and the Bible says that God was the one who acted. However, it is also possible that at some point in the record, God did speak audibly to Moses, but that is less likely because of the switch from “Yahweh” early in the verse and “God” [Elohim] later in the verse. It seems that “Yahweh” saw Moses and could see his heart, and so He commanded the angel representing Him, who was in the bush, to speak to Moses on His behalf.

[For more information on the author (God) and agent (the angel) relationship, and why the angel can speak in the first person as if he were God, see commentary on Matt. 8:5.]

**“Here I am.”** This is an idiom. Moses is not telling God that he is there; this is the equivalent of answering God’s call with “Yes,” or “It is me.”

Exd 3:5

**“Do not come near here.”** Even though God initiated the contact between His representative, the angel, and Moses, Moses could not just walk up to him. God was still too holy to casually approach. Like Aslan the Lion,[[7]](#footnote-11876) God is just and righteous, but He is not safe. The “fear of God” is more than just simple “respect for God.” Treating God and the things of God in a casual way is not wise. Jesus taught that if you are going to be afraid of anything on earth, God should be at the top of the list (Matt. 10:28). Once Moses understood who he was dealing with, he hid his face (Exod. 3:6).

**“Take your sandals off.”** In the biblical culture, it was the custom in a holy place to leave your head covering on and take your shoes off. In the Western culture, we leave our shoes on and take our hats off.

Exd 3:6

**“I am the God of your father.”** This is actually an angel speaking. This is a good example of the Jewish custom of author-agent, where the agent of a principal can act or speak as the principal himself (for more examples, see commentary on Matt. 8:5).

**“father.”** We would normally think that the word should be plural, “fathers.” But in this case, the word is singular to emphasize the covenant that God made individually with Abraham and then reconfirmed with Isaac and Jacob (see commentary on Gen. 17:8). The word “father” here does not refer to Amram, Moses’ actual father (Exod. 6:20), but rather to the “fathers of the Faith,” i.e., Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. It is also possible, but less likely, that “father” is a collective singular and is being used for “fathers” but expressed as a singular because God confirmed His covenant with all of them.

Exd 3:7

**“seen, yes, seen”** God repeats the word “seen” twice for emphasis, using different aspects of the verb. This is the figure of speech polyptoton, and it might be translated more literally, “seeing I have seen.” That God repeats the word “seen” twice shows that He is very concerned about the Israelites in Egypt and wants to do something about it.

[For more on polyptoton and the way it is translated in the REV, see commentary on Gen. 2:16. Also, see Word Study: “Polyptoton.”]

Exd 3:8

**“I have come down.”** In the Old Testament God usually represents Himself as being in one single place rather than being omnipresent, and that is certainly what most of the people thought about Him (see commentary on Gen. 17:1).

**“spacious land.”** We normally do not think of Israel as a “spacious land,” since it is small compared to other countries, but at this time in Egypt’s history, the only fertile land in Egypt was within a very short distance from the Nile River; all the rest was desert. So the Egypt that was livable south of the Nile Delta was only a few miles wide, and compared to that, Israel was “spacious.”

**“honey.”** Although this may refer to date syrup, or “date honey,” archaeologists have recently discovered solid evidence that bees were cultivated for their honey in the ancient world.

Exd 3:10

**“from Egypt!”** God here reveals to Moses that His ultimate goal was to get the Israelites out of Egypt. The Hebrew text can be translated as an imperative here, and it seems that God did speak firmly to Moses in this situation.

It is noteworthy however, that when Moses first went to Pharaoh he did not ask for the release of Israel, but that they would be allowed to go three days journey into the wilderness to worship Yahweh (Exod. 3:18; 5:3; 8:27). In the slave culture of the ancient world, Pharaoh owned the Israelites, and so for Moses to ask Pharaoh to simply let them go would have been unreasonable even though it was God’s goal and desire. However, God’s goal would be met just by asking Pharaoh to let the Israelites go and worship in the desert for three days because Pharaoh even refused that, and his refusal eventually led to the Israelites being completely free.

Exd 3:11

**“But Moses said to God.”** At this point, Moses begins to make excuses about going to Egypt to deliver the Israelites. Something completely missing in the biblical record is why Moses would do that. Moses had been willing and eager to deliver the Israelites earlier (cf. Exod. 2:11; Acts 7:23-25). What has happened to Moses that he no longer seems to care what happens to Israel in Egypt? Although there are likely many contributing factors, such as that he now has a family in Midian, we must remember that at this point in time Moses did not know that he would be with Israel in the wilderness some 40 years. His “job assignment” from God should have taken much less time than that.

A very probable reason is that Moses had been heartbroken and disappointed 40 years earlier when neither the Israelites nor God seemed to support his efforts. How could he trust them now? It can be very hard to get over a heartbreaking situation. Horse lovers know that if you fall off a horse you have to get right back on it or you can lose your desire to ride. In the church world, many Christians who go through a painful church split end up not going back to church, and if they do, and there is a second painful split, the percentage who do not go back to church rises dramatically. Moses had lost his desire to get involved with helping the Israelites, and so he asked God to send someone else (Exod. 4:13). God had to make a huge effort that took the greater part of two chapters (Exod. 3 and 4) to get Moses to go back to Egypt.

There is a great lesson in this record for Christians who desire to help other Christians who have been hurt and are on the sidelines of life as a result. If it took a huge amount of effort for God Himself to get Moses “back in the game,” so to speak, then other helpers/encouragers will also need wisdom, patience, persistence, and prayer in their efforts. Most people who have been hurt need outside help, so God’s encouragers need to know that they need to lovingly insert themselves (intrude) into the lives of those who are hurt to get them moving again in a positive direction.

**“Who am I.”** This is Moses’ first excuse to not go to Egypt. This excuse seems totally normal, but it is just an excuse. Moses did not really want to go, as we learn in Exodus 4:13. But saying “Who am I” can seem reasonable. We often underestimate our abilities, especially when it comes to things that God wants us to do. But God would not ask if we could not do what He wanted. Successful believers need to see themselves as God sees them.

Exd 3:12

**“you all.”** The singular “you” is used the first four times that “you” is in Exodus 3:12, when the angel is speaking directly to Moses. Then the “you” changes to the plural “you” in the fifth and last use in the verse, and that change is brought out by the English phrase “you all.”

**“this will be the sign for you...you all will serve God on this mountain.”** At first glance, it seems strange that the sign that God sent Moses was that they would eventually serve God on Mount Sinai, but in God’s mind that was the important sign. What Moses could not have known was that God would eventually gather all Israel at the foot of Mount Sinai and then come down in their sight on top of the Mount with fire, smoke, and darkness, and shout the Ten Commandments down to them (see commentary on Exod. 20:1), which would be an amazing sign. In consideration of that, the more immediate signs, like the Nile becoming blood, were not as important and may not have been perceived by everyone as signs from God at all, but people may have believed that the “signs” were natural disasters or could have been from one of the Egyptian gods and not Yahweh.

Exd 3:13

**“if I go.”** The Hebrew is written in a way that expresses Moses’ reservations about going back to Egypt. In short, he is saying, “Suppose I do all this….” The word we use to express that feeling is “If.”

**“What is his name?”** We are used to the name of God just being a meaningless name, but in the ancient world names usually meant something, and not just random things, but things that said something about the god (or person). For example, the evidence is that “El Shaddai” means “God, the One of the Mountain” (see commentary on Gen. 17:1). The Israelites would have wanted to know the name of God so they would know something about Him.

Exd 3:14

**“I Will Be Who I Will Be.”** The Hebrew verb translated as “will be” is an imperfect verb, not a present tense verb. The imperfect verb in Hebrew is usually a future tense. Note that in Exodus 3:12, just two verses earlier, God told Moses, “I will be with you,” translating the verb as “will be.” But then, two verses later, Exodus 3:14 has the same verb but is translated as “am.” The verb also occurs in other places where it is translated as “will be” (e.g., Exod. 4:12, 15; Deut. 31:23; Josh. 1:5). The verb can also be translated as “I will become what I will become.”

The standard theological explanation for why the verb “will be” is generally translated as “am” is that God always is, and He inhabits the past, present, and future. However, that is debatable. In any case, the proper translation of the Hebrew is not “am” but “will be.”

This “name,” “I Will Be Who I Will Be,” is clearly related to the proper name of God, Yahweh, (actually YHVH) because it is derived from the trilateral root (H-V-H), which is from an earlier root (H-Y-H) “to be.” Even that does “double duty,” because it can both refer to God, who is Eternal and who “is,” and it can refer to what He will become and do.

When God says He will be who He will be, one of the obvious meanings is that God will become what His people need Him to become for them: the provider, the deliverer, the comforter, etc. On the other hand, God will become what He Himself “will become,” apart from human condition or desire. He is God and Creator, and He is not subject to the will and whims of humans. He will become what He will become according to His plan, wisdom, and desire.

God’s proper “name” is Yahweh, but when asked His name, He did not say, “Yahweh,” He said, “I Will Be Who I Will Be.” This shows us that God’s name, Yahweh, is intrinsically connected to His character, which is multifaceted, and cannot be simplified into a simple name or concept, such as “God is love.” While He is love, He is much more than that.

Although almost all English versions have “I am that I am” as the translation of Exodus 3:14, a number of versions have “I will become [or “be”] what I will become” as an acceptable translation and put in a marginal note to that effect (cf. CEB, HCSB, ESV, NAB, NET, NIV, NLT, NRSV). There are other sources that support the reading “I will be” as well. For example, Theodotion and Aquila’s Greek Translations of the Torah (130-150AD) have, “I will be who I will be” (“εσομαι ὅς εσομαι;” *esomai hos esomai*). So, they certainly capture the future tense of the Hebrew.[[8]](#footnote-22357) Also, the Aramaic Targums of Onkelos and Neofiti preserve the future tense “will be” of אֶֽהְיֶ֑ה in Exodus 3:14.[[9]](#footnote-13507) Also, William Propp’s Translation in the Anchor Bible series of Exodus 3:14 is, “Then Deity said to Moses, “I will be who I will be.” And He said, “Thus you will say to Israel’s Sons: ‘”I-will-be” has sent me to you.'”[[10]](#footnote-25099)

It is likely that some of the pressure to preserve the translation “I Am” in English Bibles comes from the belief in the Trinity and that supposedly Jesus claimed to be God in John 8:58 by saying that he was the “I am,” but that is not the case.

[For more on the meaning of John 8:58, see commentary on John 8:58. For more on the Trinity being only a tradition, see Appendix 6: “Jesus is the Son of God, Not God the Son.”]

Exd 3:15

**“Yahweh.”** This is one of the verses that shows that the name “Yahweh” was known by the people of God from the earliest times. Some scholars assert that God’s name Yahweh (it may have been pronounced differently) was a later development, but it is used in the records in Genesis from earliest times. Words such as Elohim and El Shaddai are not names, they are titles. “Yahweh” is the only actual name of God in the Bible.

What is about to happen is that Moses, who has been gone from Israel for 40 years, is about to go back to Egypt and try to convince the Israelites that the God they have been crying out to for many years has now heard them, met with Moses, and sent him back to deliver them. If Moses comes in the name of some strange god that was not the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, it could well be that Israel would have rejected him. Moses must come in the name of God that Israel is familiar with, and with signs to prove that Yahweh has indeed met with him and empowered him to deliver Israel from Egypt. When Moses did come back to Egypt in the name of Yahweh and with signs, the Israelites welcomed him. But Moses thought that the Israelites might say, “Yahweh has not appeared to you” (Exod. 4:1).

**“Abraham...Isaac…Jacob.** God made His covenant with Abraham, and reconfirmed it with Isaac and Jacob. The reason God mentions them in this context is that it emphasizes the covenant that God made with the “Fathers,” which included giving them the land of Israel, so the Israelites would have to be delivered from Egypt for the covenant to be fulfilled.

**“I am to be remembered.”** The Hebrew is a noun, and it is related to memory. It is a way we are to remember and think about God (cf. Ps. 135:13). He is Yahweh.

Exd 3:16

**“I have visited, yes, visited you.”** The Hebrew text doubles the word “visited” for emphasis, which is the figure of speech polyptoton (see commentary on Gen. 2:16). When God “visited” someone, He intervened in their life, and He could intervene for the better or for the worse. The exact meaning of the Hebrew perfect tense of the verb here in Exodus 3:16 has been debated, and it could be a perfect of intent (“I have decided to intervene”), an instantaneous perfect (“I will now intervene”), or prophetic perfect (“I will intervene in the future”). However, it seems best, given the situation, that the perfect tense should be taken as literally meaning that God had already, in the past, started the process of delivering the Israelites from Egypt, which indeed He had and, in fact, had already foreseen that Egypt would have to be smitten for that to happen (cf. Exod. 3:20). No doubt the Israelites, who wanted to be free from their slavery in Egypt, remembered that Joseph had prophesied that God would visit Israel and bring them from Egypt to the Promised Land (Gen. 50:24-25).

[For more on “visit,” see commentary on Exod. 20:5.]

**“what is being done to you in Egypt.”** The verb is present tense, and some English versions pick up on that (e.g., CJB, JPS, NAB).

Exd 3:17

**“the land of the Canaanite.”** God lists six nations that inhabit the Promised Land. In Deuteronomy 7:1 and some other places, He lists seven nations. The missing nation in this list is the Girgashites. At the time of Moses and Joshua, the Promised Land was occupied by pagan nations. God told Israel to drive out those pagans and take possession of the land. God had the right to give the land to the Israelites. For one thing, He is the creator of the heavens and the earth and the earth belongs to Him (Ps. 24:1; 1 Cor. 10:26). Also, as the Creator of all human beings, He sets the moral standards by which people are to live. In this case, the pagan nations who inhabited the Promised Land were very ungodly and besides ignoring God’s ordinances and worshiping deities that were enemies of God and who did not lead people to everlasting life, they practiced such things as ritual sex and human sacrifice and thus deserved God’s judgment. People may have the right to disobey God, but they cannot escape the fact that they cannot ignore their Creator like that and not have consequences. Sometimes those consequences only really show themselves on Judgment Day, while sometimes the consequences occur in this life also.

**“and...and...and...and ...and.”** God uses the figure of speech polysyndeton (“many ands”) to emphasize each individual tribe. God intends to give all their land to Israel.

Exd 3:18

**“the God of the Hebrews, has met with us.”** God did not meet with the elders of Israel the way He met with Moses, but by the time they went to Pharaoh, He had met with them. God met very personally with Moses, and Moses, representing God, met with the elders of Israel. Also, although the signs that God gave Moses for the elders and for Pharaoh are spoken about later in Moses’ conversation with God, in actuality, they would have happened before the elders met with Pharaoh. Thus, in a very real sense, before Moses and the elders went to Pharaoh, God would have met with them and demonstrated His power.

**“let us go three days’ journey into the wilderness.”** It was always God’s intention that the children of Israel would leave Egypt and go into the Promised Land (cf. Exod. 3:10), but that is not what He wanted Moses to ask for. That Pharaoh would deny the Israelites three days to go and worship their God revealed the hard and cruel heart of Pharaoh. To him, he owned the Israelites and they were just like cattle to him; they had no rights as human beings. God never had to ask Pharaoh to actually let Israel go entirely, Pharaoh would not let them even go away for three days. It was in not even granting this lesser request that God was clearly given leave to have the Israelites depart from Egypt entirely.

Exd 3:19

**“I know that the king of Egypt will not give you permission to go.”** God knew both the heart of Pharaoh and the culture of the time, so it made sense to Moses that God would know Pharaoh would not let his slaves go just because Moses asked him to. God knew there would have to be a power showdown between He and Pharaoh, but it was still Pharaoh’s free will choice to not let the Israelites go when Moses started displaying the power of God. God started demonstrating His power very gently, with no loss of life of man or beast. Only as Pharaoh continued to harden his heart did the plagues get really damaging.

**“not unless *he is compelled* by a strong hand.”** The Hebrew phrase is difficult, and most translations do what the REV has done and clarify the text by adding words about Pharaoh being compelled or forced to let Israel go.

However, it is also possible to translate the Hebrew text differently, saying that Pharaoh would not let the Israelites go even by a strong hand. So, for example, the NET Bible reads, “But I know that the king of Egypt will not let you go, not even under force” (cf. ASV, KJV, CSB). But although that is a possible translation of the Hebrew text, it does not seem to be the best translation because even though Pharaoh refused to let Israel go through plague after plague, eventually God’s power did force Pharaoh to let Israel go. Nevertheless, God’s statement to Moses warned him about how difficult it would be to get Pharaoh to let Israel go. The ten plagues would have taken at least a year to complete.

Exd 3:20

**“he will send you *away*.** The Hebrew is stronger than simply saying “he will let you go,” even though most English Bibles read that way (cf. ASV, CJB, CSB, ESV, NASB). The Hebrew reads that Pharaoh will “send away” the Israelites (cf. LSV, REV, [NET text note](https://classic.net.bible.org/verse.php?book=Exo&chapter=3&verse=20&tab=commentaries), REB, Rotherham, Septuagint, Young’s Literal Translation). And Pharaoh and the Egyptians did send the Israelites away (Exod. 12:31-33).

Exd 3:22

**“any woman who is staying in her house.”** The women who were staying in another woman’s house were Egyptian women who were staying in the house of the Israelites on a temporary basis. We know it refers to Egyptian women because the Israelite women were to ask them, along with other Egyptians, for articles of silver, gold, etc. It was likely because the Israelites lived in a tight-knit community rather than a community of mixed people groups that the Egyptian women sometimes lived in the Jew’s houses rather than had their own house built in among the Israelite’s houses. It is not clear why Egyptians living in Israelite houses was so common it gets mentioned here.

When it comes to getting the articles of silver, gold, and clothing, instead of “ask” for the articles, some English versions have the word “borrow,” as if the Israelites were going to “borrow” the articles and then return them later (cf. JPS, KJV, Tyndale). The Hebrew text clearly has the word “ask,” *shaʾalah* (#07592 שָׁאֲלָ֨ה), which can also mean “demand.” There is a different Hebrew word for “borrow.” The Israelites were not dishonest, disingenuous, or immoral. They asked the Egyptians for things and the Egyptians gave them to the Israelites. At the time they asked, everyone knew the intention of the Israelites was to leave Egypt, so nothing was “borrowed.”

Here in Exodus 3:22, God tells the Israelites what to do to get the valuable articles from Egypt, and in Exodus 12:35-36 the Israelites act on what God told them to do.

**Exodus Chapter 4**

Exd 4:1

**“they will not believe me.”** This statement reveals the deep level of distrust and discouragement that Moses had due to his past experience. God said that the Israelites would listen to Moses (Exod. 3:18), but Moses does not believe that.

[For more on the depth of Moses’ doubt and the reason for it, see commentary on Exod. 3:11.]

Exd 4:3

**“And Moses fled from it.”** The Hebrew is more literally, “fled from its face (or presence). Moses likely saw snakes regularly while watching the sheep, and no doubt knew that there were poisonous and non-poisonous snakes. That Moses ran from this snake is good evidence it was one he recognized as poisonous.

Exd 4:4

**“and take it by the tail.”** Here we see God building Moses’ trust in Him. Any snake, poisonous or not, is picked up behind the head. That Moses obeyed God at this point shows that in his heart he believed God and wanted to follow Him.

Exd 4:6

**“inside your cloak.”** The Hebrew can also be understood as “on your chest,” but that does not fit with the context here.

**“white as snow.”** Referring to the color white fits with the description of the leprosy in Leviticus 13:3. Although some commentators think the idea should be “flaky” as snow, that does not fit as well with Leviticus.

Exd 4:8

**“the voice of the first sign.”** The Hebrew word translated “voice” here in Exodus 4:8 is *qol* (#06963 קוֹל, also sometimes spelled קֹל), and it primarily means “sound” or “voice.” The text is worded such that the signs have a voice and speak a message, and God does indeed make signs that have a voice and speak a message. Signs do not “just happen.” God makes them with a purpose and they have a “voice” and speak for Him.

Exd 4:10

**“Please.”** The Hebrew text has a particle that is used when entreating another and asking to speak. It is sometimes translated “please” (cf. NASB).

**“I am not eloquent.”** The Hebrew is literally, “I am not a man of words.” Most scholars have taken this to be referring to eloquent and convincing speech, such as a leader needs. However, there have been other suggestions as well, such as that Moses stuttered, but there is no solid evidence of that. The phrase, “slow of speech” seems to refer to not being eloquent. It does not seem that Moses stuttered or had a speech impediment. However, Moses does say he is a man with “uncircumcised lips” (Exod. 6:30), and what that means is unclear. Some scholars have suggested that it refers to speaking as if one had something covering the lips and making the speech unclear, but that is an assumption. We don’t actually know what the idiom “uncircumcised lips” means.

Exd 4:11

**“Who made man’s mouth?”** God is pointing out that He is fully aware of Moses’ abilities and shortcomings, and has chosen him for this task, so Moses should not question God’s choice.

Exd 4:12

**“I will be with your mouth.”** This is an indication that Moses will speak what God tells him to.

Exd 4:13

**“Please...please.”** Moses really does not want to go, but ends up doing the will of God. Great people obey God no matter what the cost. Jesus Christ was in a similar situation in the Garden of Gethsemane when he asked God if there was another way besides death on the cross (Matt. 26:39). There is no shame in asking God if there is another way. Sometimes there is and God will change His assignment. He did for Ezekiel (Ezek. 4:10-15).

**“Send, please, someone else.”** The Hebrew is somewhat more literally, “send by the hand you will send,” which is a roundabout, and therefore “more tactful and polite” way of saying, “send someone else.” It seems that Moses did not want to directly and clearly tell God that he did not want to go.

Exd 4:14

**“speak, yes, speak.”** God uses the figure of speech polyptoton here doubling the word “speak,” in order to magnify that Aaron can speak well.

[For more on polyptoton, see commentary on Gen. 2:16.]

Exd 4:15

**“I will be with your mouth and with his mouth.”** Many times in Scripture God tells people what to say or write (e.g., Jer. 36). Jesus himself said that what he spoke came from God (see commentary on John 8:28).

**“you both.”** The text here is plural, referring to both Moses and Aaron.

Exd 4:16

**“he will be a mouth for you, and you will be God to him.”** When God told Moses that he would be “God” to Aaron, it is understood that God is making a comparison that Moses would be “God” to Aaron because he would tell Aaron what to say and do. So just as God speaks to Moses who is His mouth and speaks to the people, now Moses will be “God” and Aaron will be the mouth and speak to the people. In Exodus 7:1, Moses is God to Pharaoh. In every case like this, Moses is actually the agent of God, but in the biblical culture, the agent is so fully empowered that he is sometimes called by the name of the one who sent him.

[For more on the custom of agency, see commentary on Matt. 8:5.]

Exd 4:18

**“brothers.”** In this context, the word “brothers” refers to Moses’ relatives. Moses would have had general information from traders traveling through, but likely no information about his specific extended family.

**“Jethro.”** “Jethro” is the priestly name of Reuel, the father-in-law of Moses (see commentary on Judg. 4:11).

Exd 4:20

**“set them on a donkey.”** It is possible the children were small enough that they could sit with their mother on one donkey, or the word “donkey” could just reflect the custom of putting the wife on a donkey if possible—Moses would have had the financial means to afford donkeys—and in that case, the word “donkey” would be a collective singular. Some English versions have “donkeys” (e.g., AMP, CEV, ISV).

Although the text is written as if Moses went alone with his wife and children back to Egypt, there would have been other men with them as well, even though those men are not mentioned. In the biblical world, people traveled in groups for protection and support, something that shows up several times in Scripture. We know that Aaron went back with Moses even though he is not mentioned here. Also, after the circumcision incident recorded in Exodus 4:24-26, Moses sent Zipporah and his sons back to Midian where they stayed until Moses and the Israelites left Egypt (Exod. 18:1-5). Moses would never have let his wife and young sons travel alone in that culture; there would have been men with her to protect her. Similarly, when Abraham sent his servant to get a wife for Isaac, we would never have known anyone traveled with the servant except for Genesis 24:32, which makes it clear that he did have men traveling with him.

**“staff of God.”** The fact that the staff is called “the staff of God” points to the authority of God that the staff represented. One of the details of the biblical culture that is so common it is not generally spoken of in the Bible is that most men had a staff and took it with them when they traveled anywhere. For example, Moses had a staff with him when he shepherded sheep in Midian (Exod. 4:2). The magicians of Egypt also carried staffs (Exod. 7:12). Also, we would not know Jacob’s son Judah traveled with a staff except Tamar asked for it (Gen. 38:18). Balaam had a staff with him when he traveled from Mesopotamia to Moab (Num. 22:27). David carried a staff when he traveled and thus had it with him when he fought Goliath (1 Sam. 17:40, 43), but it is not mentioned anywhere else. The disciples of Jesus traveled with their staffs, and that shows up in a couple of different places in the Gospels (Mark 6:8; cf. Matt. 10:10; Luke 9:3).

A person’s staff was often unique to the person in the way it looked or the way it was decorated and thus it could be recognized. Tamar used that fact to her advantage to prove Judah had been with her (Gen. 38:25). Moses’ staff is called the staff of God because it represented God’s authority and was used as such (e.g., Exod. 7:9, 17; 8:5, 16; 9:23; 10:13; 14:16).

Exd 4:21

**“I will harden his heart.”** This is an example of a widely recognized Semitic idiom, often referred to as “the idiom of permission.” In the Semitic languages, an active verb can be used in a permissive sense. In other words, if anything God has done has contributed to Pharaoh’s hard heart, then God can be said to have hardened Pharaoh’s heart even though it was Pharaoh who hardened his own heart.

In the case of Pharaoh in Exodus, God asked Pharaoh to let the Israelites go. At that point, Pharaoh could have said, “Okay,” and let them go, and he and Egypt would have been unhurt, and even blessed for obeying God. But God’s demand forced Pharaoh to make a choice: he could either let God’s people go, or he could harden his heart and say, “No,” which is what he did. As Pharaoh continued to say “No,” time after time, God put more and more pressure on him in the form of plagues that affected the land and people of Egypt. As the intensity of the plagues increased and there was more and more damage to Egypt and the Egyptians, Pharaoh’s heart had to become harder and harder in order for him to keep saying “No” to God’s request to release the Israelites. But God was not the problem; Pharaoh was the problem. However, because God was the one making the request and putting the pressure on Pharaoh, the Semitic idiom of permission is expressed by the phrase “God hardened Pharaoh’s heart.” It simply means that God acted in such a way that Pharaoh had to harden his heart to resist God. God did not harden Pharaoh’s heart, Pharaoh hardened his own heart because he did not want to obey God’s request.

We use the same kind of idiom in English. If a person does something that upsets us, we might say to them, “You made me mad.” But the person did not actually “make” us mad; anger was our personal response to what the person did to us. Someone else may have the same thing happen to them as happened to us but not get angry at all. So, when we say, “You made me mad,” we are using an idiom that expresses that anger was our response to what someone else did. A trained psychologist would not say, “You made me mad,” they would say, “I responded with anger when you did what you did.”

It was due to his understanding of the Semitic idiom of permission that Joseph Rotherham, in his *Emphasized Bible*, translated Exodus 4:21 as, “I will let his heart wax bold,” rather than “I will harden his heart.” The literal truth of what was going on with Pharaoh is stated in Exodus 9:34, that he hardened his own heart. God is love. He does not do evil. But because He created people with free will, and because He set laws and norms in place that require people to live righteous lives, when people do evil it is often, via the Semitic idiom of permission, spoken of as if God was the one who did the evil.

In the account of Israel’s exodus from Egypt, the Hebrew text uses three different words to express the hardening of Pharaoh’s heart. It uses *chazaq* (#02388 חָזַק) which most often means “to strengthen or make strong,” but can mean things such as “firm, courageous, hard.” It uses *kabad* (#03513 כָּבַד), which refers to being heavy or weighty in either a good or bad sense, and thus can mean “heavy, hard, grievous, burdensome, insensitive, stubborn, unyielding, unresponsive, dull, rich, honorable, glorious.” Also, it uses *qashah* (#07185 קָשָׁה) which means to be hard, difficult, severe, fierce, harsh, stiff (used in “stiff-necked”), stubborn, obstinate.

The pattern in Exodus is as follows: God is said to harden Pharaoh’s heart ten times:

* *Chazaq* (Exod. 4:21; 9:12; 10:20, 27; 11:10; 14:4, 8, and in Exod. 14:17 God hardens the Egyptians, but Pharaoh and the leaders are in mind).
* *Kabad* (Exod. 10:1).
* *Qashah* (Exod. 7:3).

Pharaoh is said to harden his own heart, or his heart is said to be hard, ten times:

* *Chazaq* (Exod. 7:13, 22, 8:19 (this is Exod. 8:15 in some versions), Exod. 9:35).
* *Kabad* (Exod. 7:14; 8:15 (this is Exod. 8:11 in some versions), Exod. 8:32 (this is Exod. 8:28 in some versions); Exod. 9:7, 34).
* *Qashah* (Exod. 13:15)

The three different words reflect some differences in what was happening in Pharaoh’s heart, sometimes simply letting the reader know that it was hard, sometimes emphasizing that it was stubborn or unresponsive to what was happening in Egypt.

There is another reason that we should be able to comprehend that God was not making Pharaoh’s heart hard so that he would disobey God. We are all like Pharaoh to a degree, because we all have some pride, some stubbornness, and some resistance to doing the whole will of God, and thus all of us disobey God from time to time. Sometimes our disobedience is out of stubbornness or just being insensitive and unresponsive to God’s desires, and in those times it is not God “making” us disobey, it is our weak and sinful human nature, likely intermixed with a lack of focus on God and too much focus on what we ourselves want, that causes us to disobey.

God is love, and He loved the Egyptians just as much as He loved Israel. He did not want to hurt Egypt, but neither was He going to stand by while the Egyptians hurt His people and defied His will. But God did not take away Pharaoh’s free will and harden his heart; He gave Pharaoh choices. Pharaoh decided to harden his heart and defy God, but that was Pharaoh’s own doing.

It is very important to understand the Semitic idiom of permission in order to understand the Bible because the idiom occurs many times. However, there are times when God does intervene in human affairs and punishes the guilty or acts powerfully to protect His people from His enemies. A good example of this is when He helped the Israelites conquer the Canaanites and threw hailstones down from heaven upon them (Josh. 10:11). Another example is when He caused Noah’s Flood to protect humans from the overpowering wickedness of the time. Sometimes, however, there are events in the Bible when it is not clear whether or not God is directly acting or if the event is the idiom of permission. Those times require study and prayer, and we must not be in a rush to determine the correct answer, but sometimes must be content to sit in uncertainty. Generally, however, if God is said to be afflicting and killing His people, the Jews, it is the idiom of permission, but there are exceptions to that.

It is also important to note that calling the idiom, “the idiom of permission” is misleading, since God does not actively give His permission for evil to happen. It is not as if Pharaoh asked God if he could harden his heart and God said, “Yes.” The name of the idiom, “the idiom of permission” was primarily given by theologians who thought in a Calvinistic way that everything that happens is God’s will, so if evil happens then God must “permit” it. But Scripture does not teach that everything that happens is God’s will. Quite the opposite! There is an active war between Good and Evil, between God and the Devil, that is going on in the spiritual world and the physical world. Many times the will of God is not done. God wants all people to be saved, but most will not be (cf. Matt. 7:13-14), and there are thousands of other things that God wants to happen that do not happen.

There are many examples of the “idiom of permission” in the Bible (e.g., Exod. 4:21, 24; 32:35; Num. 21:6; Deut. 29:4; Josh. 11:20; Judg. 3:12; 9:23; 2 Sam. 24:1; 2 Kings 24:2; 1 Chron. 10:14; Isa. 6:10; 45:7; Jer. 36:3; 42:10; Ezek. 14:9).

[For more detail on the idiom of permission, see commentary on Rom. 9:18. For more on God not having to give His permission for the Devil to act, see commentary on Luke 4:6.]

Exd 4:22

**“Israel is my son.”** This is one of the many places that support that God is not a Trinity. Trinitarians assert that because Jesus is the “son” of God, that he is also God. But in actuality, if someone is a son of God, that is proof positive that he is not God. Adam was a son of God (Luke 3:38), and here Israel is said to be a son of God, and neither Adam or Israel is, or could be, God. Here in Exodus 4:22, the word “son” is being used metaphorically, because in a metaphorical sense God “gave birth” to Israel. The word “son” also describes the closeness God felt to the Israelites; in the idiom of the biblical culture they could be said to be His children, so to speak.

[For more on there not being a Trinity and Jesus not being God, see Appendix 6, “Jesus is the Son of God, Not God the Son.” The word “father,” like the word “son,” was sometimes used in a cultural idiomatic way; see commentary on Gen. 4:20.]

**“my firstborn.”** When God said that Israel was His “firstborn son,” He was opening the door for others besides Israel to be accepted into His family. We see this to a small degree in the Old Testament when Gentiles become an important part of Israelite society (cf. Rahab the Canaanite, Ruth the Moabitess, Uriah the Hittite), and Jesus Christ spoke of it too: “And I have other sheep that are not of this fold. I must bring them also, and they will listen to my voice. And there will be one flock *with* one shepherd” (John 10:16). But the door was fully opened after the Day of Pentecost when God made “one new person” out of both Jews and Gentiles (Eph. 2:11-14).

Exd 4:24

**“on the road.”** This record in Exodus 4:24-26 is one of the records in the Word of God that reminds us how important it is to obey God’s commands. Only when we obey God can we stand legally under his protection and blessing. This is especially true for leaders. The spiritual warfare that rages around God’s leaders makes it imperative that they do their best to obey God.

Many years before Moses lived, God had made it clear to Abraham that if a person was going to be included in the covenant he must be circumcised, and that anyone, even those people who were bought to be slaves, were to be circumcised (Gen. 17:9-14). Any uncircumcised male was considered to have broken the covenant (Gen. 17:14). Children were to be circumcised when they were eight days old (Gen. 17:12). This was the responsibility of the parents, and culturally that responsibility fell upon the father.

Moses had not circumcised at least one of his sons (perhaps both of them), because Zipporah is said to only circumcise one of them (Exod. 4:25). The Bible does not tell us why Moses did not circumcise his son, so we do not really know. One possibility is that it could have been due to a request by his Midianite wife. Perhaps if he did circumcise his oldest son there was an inordinate amount of suffering and so she resisted circumcising their second son. What is clear is that Moses did not circumcise at least one of his sons, and in doing that he opened himself and/or his son up to the attack of the Adversary. The text is also not clear how Zipporah figured out that the attack was related to their son not being circumcised, but she did figure it out.

The Hebrew text says that once the child was circumcised, God “let him go.” Even though it saved the life of her husband or son, Zipporah’s disgust with the whole situation is clear. She took her son’s foreskin “and threw it at Moses’ feet” (Exod. 4:25 NASB). Some commentators argue that she just “touched” his feet with it, but given the vocabulary and the obvious emotion in the text, “threw” is no doubt what happened. Also, although the Hebrew text does not say “Moses’ feet,” but rather “his feet,” the context and the fact that she then spoke to Moses, makes it clear that it was Moses’ feet and not her son’s feet.[[11]](#footnote-29137) Zipporah’s disgust is also communicated effectively by her words, “You are indeed a bridegroom of blood to me” (Exod. 4:25 NASB1995). Although exactly what she meant is not explained, the fact that she had to shed her son’s blood and cause him (especially at his now older age) significant pain and suffering caused her to call Moses “a bridegroom of blood.”

As stated above, this record of the incident reminds us of the importance of keeping God’s commands and the seriousness of disobeying them, but it also no doubt indelibly impressed the same lesson in Moses’ mind. He was guilty of a grave sin in the eyes of God, which the Adversary was not just going to overlook. The Hebrew text says that “Yahweh met him and sought to put him to death,” but we know from the scope of Scripture as well as the Semitic way of speaking that this is no doubt the idiom we refer to as the “idiom of permission” where the active verb “met” is used in a permissive sense, “allowed him to be met.” Moses’ sin in not circumcising his son meant that Yahweh could not effectively protect the family, which allowed the Adversary entry into their lives. God does not desire to put people to death even when they sin. In direct contrast, the Adversary always looks for openings to “steal, kill, and destroy” (John 10:10), and he had every reason to try to kill Moses or his son.

To Moses, the importance of the lesson did not revolve around “who” was trying to kill him, but rather “why.” If someone is outside the covenant or the will of God, that person is exposed to a death sentence, and that can be especially true of leaders. This is a very important lesson, and became very apparent in the coming years both in Egypt, where many died due to disobedience, and in the Wilderness Wanderings, when Aaron’s two sons, and leaders such as Korah, Dathan, and Abiram, died due to their rebellion (Lev. 10:2; Num. 16:25-33).

The Hebrew text makes it clear that Zipporah performed the circumcision with a flint knife. Far from being barbaric, microscopic studies of the edges of flint and steel knives reveal that the edge of a well-knapped flint knife can be actually sharper than surgical steel, and a freshly knapped edge is completely sterile, protecting anyone who is cut with it from infection.

Another thing that is not specifically stated in the record, but can be gleaned by reading about Moses in Egypt and Exodus 18:2 is that after this incident, Moses sent Zipporah and his sons back to her father, Jethro the priest of Midian, where she stayed until after the Exodus from Egypt, many months later.

[For more on the idiom of permission, see commentary on Exod. 4:21.]

**“Yahweh met him and sought to put him to death.”** The Hebrew text is ambiguous here, and does not tell us who the “him” is. The Jewish scholars usually say it is Moses’ son, while the Christian scholars generally say it is Moses.

Exd 4:25

**“and touched his feet.”** Although some English versions and the Jerusalem Talmud say that Zipporah “threw it at his feet,” the Masoretic Hebrew more literally reads that she “touched his feet.” It is unclear who the “his” refers to, Moses or the son. Also, the reason for her touching the feet of Moses or the boy is unclear. It may be to identify the blood with Moses or the boy, and it may even be some kind of precursor of the Passover celebration and the protection the Passover blood provided. The same Hebrew verb, translated “touch” is used here and in Exodus 12:22 when the blood from the Passover lamb was “touched” to the doorpost of the house. The closest thing to a doorpost in the human body is a leg.

**“a husband of blood.”** The Hebrew phrase is unique and has so far been found only in Exodus 4:25-26 in all the Hebrew writings, so the meaning and translation are uncertain.

Exd 4:26

**“At that time she said, ‘a husband of blood.’”** Sometime after this event, and before Moses entered Egypt, Zipporah took her children and returned to her father in Midian (cf. Exod. 18:1-5).

Exd 4:27

**“and kissed him.”** This is the standard oriental kiss of greeting, a kiss on the cheek, which often involved kissing both cheeks.

Exd 4:28

**“that he had sent him** ***to say.*”** The Hebrew text is more literally, “with which He has sent him, and all the signs with which He has charged him” (LSV), but that can be somewhat confusing in English.

Exd 4:30

**“and he did the signs.”** The “he” is ambiguous and could be Moses, but sometimes Aaron was the one who acted to make a sign occur (Exod. 7:9-10). The word “signs” is plural and probably refers to turning a staff into a snake and making the hand leprous (cf. Exod. 4:8).

Exd 4:31

**“had visited the children of Israel.”** God had remembered the Israelites and had started the process of their deliverance. This was promised by Jacob (Gen. 50:24-25). The fact that the Israelites believed is evidence that at this point the Israelites accepted the leadership of Moses and Aaron (see commentary on Exod. 3:16).

**“kneeled and bowed down.”** This kneeling preceded bowing down to the ground. The two actions, kneeling and then bowing to the ground blended into one act of homage or worship. The common biblical way of bowing down before people or God was to fall to one’s knees and bow the upper body and face to the earth. Also, instead of “kneeled and bowed down,” the text could be translated “bowed down and worshiped,” with “kneeling” being understood as part of the process of bowing down, and “bowing down” was the act of worship. The same Hebrew verb is translated as both “bow down” and “worship;” traditionally “worship” if God is involved and “bow down” if people are involved, but the verb and action are the same, the act of bowing down is the worship.

[For more on bowing down, see Word Study: “Worship.”]

**Exodus Chapter 5**

Exd 5:1

**“hold a feast.”** The Hebrew phrase is one verb, which gets translated as “hold a feast” in English. So the emphasis of the sentence is less on “hold a FEAST” as it is “hold-a-feast TO ME.” Thus, the emphasis in the text is not the feasting and partying, but rather that Israel would feast to God, i.e., to have a venue for worshiping Him. This is more clearly seen in Exodus 5:3.

Exd 5:5

**“and you have caused them to cease.”** The Hebrew text is causative. Pharaoh is clearly blaming Moses for the fact that the Israelites, who did not want to be slaves anyway, had slacked off of their work.

Exd 5:7

**“like you did before.”** The Hebrew text is idiomatic: “like yesterday and time-past,” but it means “like you did before.”

Exd 5:11

**“none.”** The text is literally, “nothing,” but in this context it means “no part.”

Exd 5:14

**“the foremen of the children of Israel.”** The Egyptians appointed certain Israelites as foremen over the rest of the Israelite slave labor force. While there may have been certain advantages to this, it no doubt caused a division among the Israelites, as those foremen would become resented and hated by the rest of the Israelites, much as the Jewish tax collectors acting as agents of Rome were hated by the Jews in Jesus’ time. “Divide and conquer” has been a successful strategy for millennia.

Exd 5:20

**“When they came out from Pharaoh.”** The foremen had been in with Pharaoh, talking to him about the heavy load that had been placed on them (Exod. 5:15). When they saw Moses and Aaron standing there waiting to see how things went with Pharaoh, the foremen confronted them.

**“they confronted Moses and Aaron.”** The Hebrew word “confronted” is translated from the Hebrew word *pagaʿ* (#06293 פָּגַע), which usually just refers to meeting someone. However, in this case, the meeting was not just a friendly exchange but a “confrontation” (e.g., CSB, LSB, NLT, Schocken Bible; cf. NAB “assailed”).

Exd 5:21

**“the smell of us stink in the eyes of Pharaoh.”** This idiomatic statement is graphic even though it seems disjointed to us in English because we don’t “stink” in the “eyes,” we “stink” in the nose. The idiom basically means “You have made us contemptible to Pharaoh.”

Exd 5:22

**“Moses returned to Yahweh.”** This had to be in prayer, there was no Temple or “place” that Moses would go back to.

Exd 5:23

**“to speak in your name.”** The phrase means “to speak on your behalf” or “to speak as your representative.”

**Exodus Chapter 6**

Exd 6:1

**“by a strong hand.”** This is idiomatic for “by force.” The strong hand is a forceful hand. In this case, the force was ten plagues.

Some scholars believe the strong hand is the strong hand of Pharaoh, so for example the NAB translates the last part of the verse, “For by a strong hand, he will let them go; by a strong hand, he will drive them from his land.” However, that does not seem to be the correct understanding of the verse. By the time Pharaoh finally let Israel go, his country was considerably weakened. In contrast, Yahweh’s plagues were getting more and more powerful.

Exd 6:3

**“El Shaddai.”** “El Shaddai” is the name of God that is commonly translated as “God Almighty” (see commentary on Gen. 17:1).

**“but by my name Yahweh I was not known to them.”** The Patriarchs knew the name of Yahweh and used it (cf. Gen. 12:8; 13:4; 16:13; 21:33; 22:14; 26:22, 25; Exod. 8:8; 9:27; etc.). However, they likely did not know the full significance of the name. Nahum Sarna writes that Exodus 6:3 “cannot, therefore, reflect the introduction of a new name. On the contrary, precisely because the bearer of the name is well-known, and its mention evokes such emotions as awe, reverence, honor, and fear, its use as the source and sanction of a law or edict reinforces its authority and encourages compliance. …In the ancient Near Eastern world names in general, and the name of a god in particular, possessed a dynamic quality and were expressive of character, or attributes, and potency. The names of gods were immediately identified with their nature, status, and function, so that to say ‘I did not make myself known to them by my name YHVH’ is to state that the patriarch did not experience the essential power associated with the name YHVH. The promises made to them belonged to the distant future. The present reiteration of those promises exclusively in the name of YHVH means that fulfillment is imminent. … Support for the understanding that ‘knowing the name of YHVH’ means witnessing or being made to experience the display of divine might is found in several biblical passages”[[12]](#footnote-12960) [e.g., Isa. 52:6; Jer. 16:21].

[For more on “Yahweh,” see commentary on Genesis 2:4.]

Exd 6:4

**“the land of their sojournings in which they lived.”** The Hebrew text is more literally, “the land of their sojournings in which they sojourned,” thus using both the noun and the verb for “sojourn,” but that does not read well in English. God promised the patriarchs that He would give the land of Israel to Abraham and his descendants many times, and said it in slightly different ways. He said it to Abraham (Gen. 12:7; 13:15-17; 15:7, 18; 17:8), to Isaac (Gen. 26:3), and to Jacob (Gen. 28:13; 35:12; 48:4).

Exd 6:5

**“and I have remembered my covenant.”** This phrase means a lot more than God just “remembered.” This is the idiomatic or “pregnant” sense of “remembered,” and it means that God remembered the covenant and intended to act on it.

[For more on the idiomatic sense of “remembered,” see commentary on Luke 23:42.]

Exd 6:6

**“forced labor.”** See commentary on Exodus 2:11.

Exd 6:7

**“you will know that I am Yahweh.”** It seems this phrase would almost be better translated as “you will experience that I am Yahweh.” The phrase occurs some 70 times in the Old Testament. Nahum Sarna writes about the Hebrew word translated as “know,” which is *yada* (#03045 יָדַע):

“It is a key term in the Exodus narratives, occurring over twenty times in the first fourteen chapters. The usual rendering, ‘to know,’ hardly does justice to the richness of its semantic range. In the biblical conception, knowledge is not essentially or even primarily rooted in the intellect and mental activity. Rather, it is more experiential and is embedded in the emotions, so that it may encompass such qualities as contact, intimacy, concern, relatedness, and mutuality. Conversely, not to know is synonymous with disassociation, indifference, alienation, and estrangement; it culminates in callous disregard for another's humanity.”[[13]](#footnote-12878)

The translation “you will know that I am Yahweh” can be confusing to English readers who have a Western mindset, because Yahweh says over and over, “you will know that I am Yahweh,” but Israel does not “know” (mentally acknowledge and remember) that Yahweh is God. They forgot Him, ignored Him, and defied Him over and over. Thus, in most contexts, the translation “you will experience that I am Yahweh” makes more sense because Israel did in fact experience that “I am Yahweh your God” by experiencing His power and authority, even if they were not impacted enough by that experience to remember and obey Him.

We can see the value of understanding that “you will know” usually refers to “you will experience” when we see the phrase used of others besides Israel. For example, God told Moses, “The Egyptians will know that I am Yahweh when I stretch out my hand against Egypt” (Exod. 7:5). The Egyptians did not intellectually know or understand what there was to know about Yahweh as the Most High God and creator of the heavens and earth, but they certainly experienced Yahweh’s power and thus His authority as God.

Exd 6:8

**“I lifted up my hand *in an oath*.”** It is a common practice in many cultures to raise a hand when swearing or saying an oath. It is done in the courts of the USA today.

**“give it to you as a possession.”** In this context, the word “possession” can also refer to an “inheritance” (e.g. ASV, BBE, CJB, KJV, NJB, RV, TLV, WEB). God repeated the promise that He would give the land of Israel to Abraham and his descendants many times, and said it in slightly different ways. He told Abraham that he and his descendants would get the land (Gen. 12:7; 13:15-17; 15:7, 18; 17:8). He told it to Isaac (Gen. 26:3). He told it to Jacob (Gen. 28:13; 35:12; 48:4). Then over and over He told Israel about the promise or that He would give them the land (e.g., Exod. 6:4, 8; 12:25; 13:5, 11; Lev. 14:34; 20:24; 23:10; 25:2). This fact was also stated by the Psalmist (Ps. 105:8-10).

Exd 6:11

**“let the children of Israel go.”** This phrase (“let the children of Israel go,” or “let my people go”**)** occurs in various contexts throughout the record of Israel in Egypt. The Hebrew is more literally like the Literal Standard Version (LSV) translates the text: “and he sends the sons of Israel out of his land.” In the context of Exodus, the phrases are basically equivalent.

Exd 6:12

**“I who am of uncircumcised lips?”** The meaning of the idiom “uncircumcised lips” is debated. Some scholars believe it refers to having a “foreskin,” a blockage on the lips, and thus the idiom refers to having some kind of speech impediment. On the other hand, scholars such as George Bush believe that in the Hebrew culture, circumcision represented perfection and writes:

“As among the Jews, the circumcision of any part denoted its perfection, so on the other hand, uncircumcision, was used to signify its defectiveness or inaptitude to the purposes for which it was designed. Thus the prophet says of the Jews, Jeremiah 6:10, that ‘their ear was uncircumcised’ and adds the explanation of it, ‘because they cannot hearken.’ Again, in Jeremiah 9:26, he tells us that ‘the house of Israel were uncircumcised in heart,’ i.e., would not understand and learn their duty. In like manner, ‘uncircumcised lips’ in the passage before us [Exod. 6:12] must mean a person who was a bad speaker and wanting eloquence.”[[14]](#footnote-32734)

Exd 6:15

**“Shaul, the son of a Canaanite woman.”** Simeon had multiple wives (see commentary on Gen. 46:10).

Exd 6:18

**“Amram.”** Moses was the son of Amram, the grandson of Kohath, and the great-grandson of Jacob’s third son, Levi (Exod. 6:18, 20; 1 Chron. 2:1). So the genealogy of Moses and Aaron was: Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Levi, Kohath, Amram, Moses and Aaron.

As Levites, the job of Kohath and his descendants was to carry the Tabernacle and the things that went with it whenever the Tabernacle moved (Num. 4:15). However, when Aaron was anointed as High Priest (Lev. 16), then his line of Levites became the priests, and they had different duties than the rest of the Kohathites and the rest of the Levites.

Exd 6:20

**“Jochebed.”** Jochebed is the first name in the Bible with a “Yo” prefix, the shortened form of Yahweh.

Kohath, the son of Levi, was the father of Amram (Gen. 46:11, Exod. 6:18), and Jochebed was Amram’s aunt. Therefore, Jochebed was either Kohath’s sister (and also a daughter of Levi) or she was Kohath’s sister-in-law. However, the text does not give us the exact genealogy in this case. It is also worth remembering that children could be born many years apart from each other, and so it is quite possible that Jochebed was Moses’ age or even younger.

Exd 6:21

**“Korah.”** Korah was one of the main organizers who stirred up rebellion against Moses (Num. 16:1-3).

Exd 6:23

**“Elisheba, the daughter of Amminadab, the sister of Nahshon.”** There is a sense in which this marriage foreshadows the blending of the priesthood and kingship that the earth will experience when Jesus Christ, the Messiah, rules the earth. Aaron was the High Priest, and he married Elisheba, who was from the tribe of Judah. Nashon, her brother, is in the genealogy of Christ (Matt. 1:4; Luke 3:32-33).

Exd 6:25

**“Phinehas.”** Phinehas is an Egyptian name. The Israelites had been in Egypt long enough that they picked up some of the Egyptian language and names.

Exd 6:26

**“by their *military* divisions.”** The Hebrew is hard to translate accurately because the Israelites were not an army, they were an assembly of tribes with the same ancestry: Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. But leaving Egypt and while they were in the wilderness they camped and traveled in military-like formations, and that practice started when they left Egypt. It would have also helped them in organizing as tribes, with elders and leaders, which was beneficial to them when they eventually settled in the Promised Land in separate tribes.

Exd 6:30

**“I am of uncircumcised lips.”** See commentary on Exodus 6:12.

**Exodus Chapter 7**

Exd 7:1

**“I have made you God to Pharaoh.”** The versions are divided as to whether the verse should read “a god to Pharaoh” or “God to Pharaoh.” The Hebrew can read either way. But God granted authority to Moses to be “God” to Pharaoh, in the sense of the custom of agency (see commentary on Matt. 8:5).

The biblical languages, including Hebrew, Aramaic, Greek, and Latin, used the word “God” with a much broader meaning than we do today. In ancient cultures and languages, “GOD” was a descriptive title applied to a range of authorities, including angels and demons, lesser gods, great people, rulers, and people acting with God’s authority. We see this here in Exodus 7:1, different translations bring the Hebrew into English in different ways: “See, I have made you God to Pharaoh” (Darby). Or, “See, I have made you a god to Pharaoh” (BBE, KJV). Or, “See, I have made you like God to Pharaoh” (HCSB, ESV, NET, NIV, NRSV). A New Testament reference to the flexible meaning of “God” is John 10:33, when the Jews challenged Jesus and said he was claiming to be “a god” (mistranslated in most versions as “God”; see commentary on John 10:33), and he answered them pointing out that in the Old Testament, people to whom the Word of God came were called “GODS.”

Moses was God to Pharaoh because what Moses commanded would come to pass, and Moses would have power over Pharaoh.

Exd 7:2

**“let the children of Israel go out of his land.”** The phrase “let the Children of Israel go” occurs in various contexts throughout the record of Israel in Egypt. The Hebrew is more literally “send the children of Israel out” (see commentary on Exod. 6:11).

Exd 7:3

**“stubborn.”** The Hebrew is *qashah* (#07185 קָשָׁה); see commentary on Exodus 4:21.

Exd 7:4

**“and bring out my armies.”** When the Israelites were coming out of Egypt and when they were in the wilderness, they were organized as separate army divisions (see commentary on Exod. 6:26).

**“by great judgments.”** The “judgments” are the plagues that struck Egypt.

Exd 7:5

**“the Egyptians will know that I am Yahweh.”** This is better understood as, “the Egyptians will experience that I am Yahweh” (see commentary on Exod. 6:7).

Exd 7:9

**“It will become a serpent.”** The word translated as “serpent” means “snake,” but in this context of magic, “serpent” is the better choice in English (see commentary on Gen. 3:1).

Exd 7:11

**“Pharaoh also called for the wise men and the sorcerers...that they also would do the same.”** Many English versions are translated as if the sorcerers of Egypt did their magic right then and there. But actually, Exodus 7:11 is just Pharaoh summoning the sorcerers so they can do their magic, and then they actually do it in Exodus 7:12, as that verse says: “[the sorcerers] each cast down their staff and they became serpents.” (Other translations that are like the REV include The Schocken Bible, LSV, and YLT.) The verb translated in many versions as “did” is in the imperfect tense, and does not mean did, but refers to what will happen.

**“magic arts.”** The Devil has real power, and witches and people who align themselves with him, even if they do not fully realize who he is and worship him as a pagan god or deity, or just a “power” that can be tapped into, can bring his power to bear. People who do not believe in the supernatural dismiss and discredit records such as Exodus 7:11 by saying that the whole record was made up, or the sorcerers had various tricks to make it look like their rods became snakes (a common explanation is that the Egyptians could put a snake in a coma-like state and then revive it—but there is no actual evidence for that and it does not fit the context). However, people who believe in the Bible should pay careful attention to this record and others like it because it shows the kind of evil power that genuine sorcerers who are in league with the Devil do have.

The Bible says that Aaron’s staff became a snake by the power of God, and the text says that the magicians “do the same by their magic arts.” In other words, the sorcerers also changed their staffs into snakes, but by their secret arts. That does not mean that the sorcerers (or the Devil) had the power to make dead wood into a living snake, but it means that the Devil could teleport the staffs away and teleport live snakes to replace them, or in some other powerful manner get the staff to become a snake. But then, like snakes sometimes do, Aaron’s snake ate the sorcerers’ snakes, showing the superiority of God over the Devil.

Skeptics often scoff and say that if the Devil was that powerful, we should see things like that today. To a degree we still do, and reports of powerful magic come out of Africa, India, Haiti, and places where belief in the supernatural is still strong and every other person doesn’t have a video camera. However, the Devil is crafty, and adopts his methods to the situation and culture in which he is operating. His best tactics include secrecy and misinformation, so coming out in the open for everyone to see is not in his best interest. The disbelief and doubt of the skeptics only assist him in staying hidden and aid his evil purposes. He controls people from behind the scenes, as he has always done. The End Times will see a huge increase in manifestations of the Devil’s power, and when the Antichrist is alive on earth he will be accompanied by “all kinds of power and counterfeit signs and wonders” (2 Thess. 2:9).

The wise Christian believes the words of Paul: “For we do not wrestle against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the world-rulers of this *present* darkness, *that is*, against *all* the spiritual *forces* of evil in the heavenly places” (Eph. 6:12).

Exd 7:13

**“Pharaoh’s heart was hardened.”** See commentary on Exodus 4:21.

Exd 7:14

**“unyielding.”** The Hebrew word is *kabad* (#03513 כָּבַד), meaning unyielding, hard, insensitive, stubborn, unresponsive, dull. See commentaries on Exodus 4:21 and 10:1.

Exd 7:17

**“you will know that I am Yahweh.”** This is better understood as, “you will experience that I am Yahweh” (see commentary on Exod. 6:7).

Exd 7:19

**“Nile-streams.”** The Nile River broke into many different streams in the delta, where many Egyptians lived. Those Nile-streams turned to blood just as the main Nile River turned to blood.

Exd 7:22

**“The magicians of Egypt did the same with their magic arts.”** The Devil is very powerful and can do many powerful miracles, but he is not more powerful than Yahweh and thus although he can duplicate some of what Yahweh does, he cannot undo what Yahweh does. This must have frustrated Pharaoh immensely because he did not understand the nature of Yahweh or the nature of the Devil, whose power his magicians were using. Nevertheless, that his magicians were able to duplicate what Yahweh did was enough for him to harden his heart.

**“Pharaoh’s heart was hardened.”** See commentary on Exodus 4:21.

Exd 7:25

**“Seven days passed.”** Exodus 7:25 fits better at the beginning of chapter 8 rather than the end of chapter 7.

**Exodus Chapter 8**

Exd 8:1

**“Let my people go.”** The phrase “let tmy people go” occurs in various contexts throughout the record of Israel in Egypt. The Hebrew is more literally “send my people out” (see commentary on Exod. 6:11).

Exd 8:3

**“on your bed.”** Ancient beds were much closer to the ground than some of our modern beds are. It would not have been difficult for a frog to jump onto an Egyptian bed.

**“into the houses of your servants.”** In this context, Pharaoh’s “servants” were his high officials and military officers (see commentary on 2 Sam. 11:1).

Exd 8:5

**“Nile-streams.”** The Nile River broke into many different streams in the delta, where many Egyptians lived. Those Nile-streams turned to blood just as the main Nile River turned to blood.

Exd 8:7

**“The magicians did the same with their magic arts.”** This must have been incredibly frustrating to Pharaoh, who wanted less frogs, not more frogs.

Exd 8:9

**“I give you the honor.”** The Hebrew is an idiom, more literally, “glorify (or “beautify”) yourself over me.” The difficulty in bringing this idiom into English is why the English versions differ so much: e.g., “Have it your way” (CEB). “You may have the honor of choosing” (CSB). “Be pleased to command me” (ESV). “Glory over me” (KJV). “Beautify yourself over me” (LSV). “You are the one to gain by it” (NJB).

Exd 8:13

**“the frogs died out.”** The death of the frogs left a huge mess. The frogs did not hop back into the Nile and swim away, they died where they were and the people still had to clean up the mess (Exod. 8:14).

Exd 8:14

**“heaps upon heaps.”** The Hebrew text just doubles the noun heaps for emphasis: “They piled them up—heaps, heaps—and the land stank.”

Exd 8:15

**“unyielding.”** More literally, “he made his heart heavy.” Pharaoh talked himself out of keeping his word and doing what he said he would do. The Hebrew word is *kabad* (#03513 כָּבַד), meaning unyielding, indifferent, insensitive, stubborn, unresponsive, dull. See commentary on Exodus 4:21 and 10:1.

This verse contains a good example of why sometimes the Hebrew cannot be translated literally. In English, a “heavy heart” refers to a sad heart, but that is not the situation here. In the Hebrew idiom, a “heavy heart” is a stubborn, insensitive, unresponsive heart.

Exd 8:16

**“gnats.”** The exact identity of the insect is not agreed upon. Most scholars and modern translations think “gnats” is the correct translation. It does seem that the description of the plague fits flying insects better than “lice” does, because lice can only get from one host to another by actual physical contact, whereas gnats could get basically everywhere. Furthermore, they were a real plague; their bite was painful and therefore very hard to ignore, whereas people can have lice and not even know it. The translation “lice” was made very early and appears in the early English versions (e.g., Tyndale, Geneva, King James) and so the translation “lice” has the power of tradition behind it. However, early translators were working with limited resources and knowledge compared to what is available today, which in some cases led to inaccurate translations.

The plague of gnats is a very good example of the plagues being against the gods of Egypt as well as Pharaoh and the people. God said that He would bring judgments upon the gods of Egypt (Exod. 12:12) and this is an example. Biting insects were a real plague, not just an annoyance. Egypt was one of the countries that had a god that was supposed to protect from the insects. So, for example, the Bible mentions Beelzebub, “Lord of the flies.” That god should have protected Egypt from the gnats, but of course that “god” (a demon) was powerless against Yahweh, the true God.

Exd 8:17

**“All the dust of the earth became gnats.”** Obviously a hyperbole for emphasis.

Exd 8:18

**“tried by their magic arts to produce gnats.”** The Hebrew is idiomatic and literally reads, “the magicians did so by their magic arts,” but in the Semitic languages, sometimes trying to do something is simply expressed by doing that thing, especially if the context shows the true meaning, which it does here. However, it is also possible to read the text as “the magicians did the same—smote the ground with their staffs to produce gnats by their magic arts, but could not produce them.”

**“but they could not.”** This is a new development in the spiritual war between God and the Devil, and God’s agents and the Devil’s agents. In the first two plagues, the magicians were able to reproduce the effects that Moses and Aaron produced—the blood and the frogs. But now the sorcerers are not able to do what the power of God did.

Exd 8:19

**“This is the finger of God.”** The Hebrew can also be translated to read, “This is the finger of a god” (cf. The Schocken Bible). It is hard to say whether the magicians were specifically talking about the God of the Jews here or just generically about “a god.”

“The finger of God” is an idiom that refers to the power of God (Exod. 8:19; 31:19; Deut. 9:10; Luke 11:20), however, it also points to the incredible power of God, because He can do amazing feats with just his “finger.”

**“Pharaoh’s heart remained hard.”** See commentary on Exodus 4:21.

Exd 8:20

**“behold, he will go out to the water.”** Moses had met Pharaoh in this same way earlier (Exod. 7:15-16). The Hebrew is literally, “he goes out to the water,” but it refers to an event that is to happen in the future.

Exd 8:21

**“insects.”** The Hebrew comes from a word that means “mixed,” but what is mixed is left open. Fox has “insects” (cf. Nahum Sarna). The fact that the Hebrew comes from “mixed” likely indicates that there was more than one type of creature. Some interpreters have taken the term to refer to a mixture of wild animals[[15]](#footnote-23537) but Robert Alter explains that is unlikely because these creatures were a bother much more than a danger.[[16]](#footnote-21860)

**“the ground on which they live.”** The Hebrew is more literally, “the ground on which they are,” but it is speaking about where the Egyptians live. Worded differently, the sentence would read like this: “And the houses of the Egyptians and the ground on which they live will be filled with a mixture of insects.”

Exd 8:22

**“I will set apart the land of Goshen.”** This fourth plague was the first plague in which the children of Israel were protected by God from the plague so that only the Egyptians experienced the plague. The vast majority of the Israelites lived in the area of Goshen, so it was relatively easy for God to protect the Israelites from that plague.

Exd 8:23

**“division.”** The Hebrew word translated as “division” can also be understood as “redemption” (Ps. 111:9).

Exd 8:24

**“a thick mixture.”** The Hebrew is more literally “heavy,” but it was heavy because the insects were in a dense swarm.

Exd 8:25

**“Go! Sacrifice to your God in the land!”** During this fourth plague—mixed insects—is the first time that Pharaoh has said that he would let the children of Israel go and sacrifice. But as per the common saying, “The Devil is in the details.” Pharaoh’s offer is a compromise. Moses had told Pharaoh that God wanted them to go and sacrifice “in the wilderness,” not in the land of Egypt (Exod. 5:1; 7:16).

Many times in life Christians are asked to compromise their Faith and what God commands, but it is not wise to do so. The Bible makes it clear that every person will stand before the Lord’s judgment seat on Judgment Day (2 Cor. 5:10), and what God is looking for in the lives of His people is that they seek to obey Him first of all (Matt. 6:33). Here in Exodus, Moses models for us how a true believer walks without compromise, and Moses rejects Pharaoh’s offer.

Exd 8:26

**“the offerings we sacrifice to Yahweh our God are an abomination to the Egyptians.”** The animals that the Israelites sacrificed, such as bulls, were deities to the Egyptians, and it would be an abomination to sacrifice the image of a god.[[17]](#footnote-12644)

**“will they not stone us?”** This was very likely true. Sadly, history is full of examples of how traditional or religious people can be very narrow-minded and afraid of change or offending the gods. In those situations, many innocent people can be hurt or killed. Moses had a good understanding of the common people of Egypt and likely correctly assessed the mental state of the people and recognized if the Israelites offered animal sacrifices that in Egypt were thought to embody gods, the Israelites would be stoned.

Exd 8:27

**“as he has commanded us.”** God said the Israelites were to go into the wilderness to sacrifice (Exod. 5:1; 7:16).

Exd 8:28

**“I will let you go.”** Pharaoh went from offering a compromise to Moses (Exod. 8:25), to lying to Moses about letting Israel go. It is even possible that in the moment, Pharaoh thought he would let Israel go, but reconsidered when the plague ended. However, Ecclesiastes 5:6 says, “Do not let your mouth cause your body to sin.” The Bible has a lot to say about not being quick to speak and being wise about what we say. The bottom line is that Pharaoh told Moses he would let the Israelites go worship, and then he did not follow through with what he said.

**“you must not go very far away.”** The Hebrew doubles the word “far” for emphasis: “you are not to go far, far.” It is hard to say what Pharaoh had in mind here by what was “far.” The Israelites had children and animals, and could not walk very far in the three-day journey they were asking Pharaoh to allow them.

Exd 8:32

**“unyielding.”** The Hebrew word is *kabad* (#03513 כָּבַד), meaning unyielding, hard, insensitive, stubborn, unresponsive, dull. See Exodus 8:15 and commentary on Exodus 4:21 and 10:1.

**Exodus Chapter 9**

Exd 9:3

**“the hand of Yahweh.”** Earlier, the Egyptian magicians used the phrase “the finger of God,” while here the phrase is “the hand of Yahweh.” The “hand” represents much more power and authority.

**“will be.”** The Hebrew is a very rare present tense verb, which in this case is a prophetic present (see commentary on Eph. 2:6).

**“the camels.”** As more and more archaeological work is done in the Middle East and Egypt, there is an increasing amount of evidence that camels were well-known in Egypt, even if they were fairly rare.[[18]](#footnote-29975)

Exd 9:4

**“Yahweh will make a distinction between the livestock of Israel and the livestock of Egypt.”** As with the fourth plague, here in the fifth plague there will be a distinction between Israel and the Egyptians, and Israel will be spared the plague.

Exd 9:7

**“unyielding.”** The Hebrew word is *kabad* (#03513 כָּבַד), meaning unyielding, hard, insensitive, stubborn, unresponsive, dull. See commentary on Exodus 4:21 and 10:1.

Exd 9:8

**“from a kiln.”** The Hebrew refers to a “kiln,” not a “furnace.” We generally think of a furnace being used to heat a house, and that is not what the text is referring to. The nature of the kiln that Moses got the soot from is not stated, but there were kilns for making bricks, making pottery, blowing glass, and for working with metals. It would certainly be poetic justice if the soot came from a brick kiln. In that case, Pharaoh troubled God’s people by forcing them to make bricks, and God troubled Pharaoh by the soot from a brick kiln becoming boils on the Egyptians.

Exd 9:9

**“throughout all the land of Egypt.”** Although it is not clear here in Exodus 9:9, this sixth plague, the boils, was just on the Egyptians and not on the Israelites (Exod. 9:11), following the pattern of the fourth and fifth plagues in which the Israelites were spared.

Exd 9:12

**“hardened the heart of Pharaoh.”** See commentary on Exodus 4:21.

Exd 9:14

**“against your heart.”** In general, the “heart” is used for Pharaoh’s person, thus “against you,” and many versions translate the verse that way (e.g., CEB, CJB, CSB, ESV, JPS, NAB, NASB, NJB, NIV, NRSV). However, the Bible could have easily said “against you,” but instead the text says, “against your heart.” To the people of the Old Testament, the “heart” was the organ of the activities of the mind, i.e., thinking, planning, imagining, etc. What God seems to be saying by “against your heart” is that up until now the plagues had been upon the outer man, plagues of the flesh. But now the plagues will intensify and affect both the outer man and the inner man; the mind and the spirit. They will demoralize Pharaoh and the Egyptians and will forcibly lead to them letting Israel go.

Exd 9:16

**“all the earth.”** The Hebrew could also be translated as “all the land,” but God’s ultimate goal was to be known in all the earth.

Exd 9:17

**“by not letting them go.”** The nature of some people is to control others. That is the case here. Pharaoh had no legitimate right to enslave the Israelites. They had come into Egypt as a free people and if Pharaoh did not want them in Egypt he could have asked them to leave or driven them out. In Pharaoh, we see the evil side of human nature—the desire to control others and the arrogance to somehow think that is right.

Exd 9:20

**“into the houses.”** In Egypt, the people mainly lived in houses, not tents.

Exd 9:22

**“every plant of the field.”** The NET text note reads, “The noun refers primarily to cultivated grains. But here it seems to be the general heading for anything that grows from the ground, all vegetation and plant life, as opposed to what grows on trees.” That note makes sense because it would be hard for the hail to destroy only the grains without destroying all the vegetation in the field.

Exd 9:23

**“And Moses stretched out his staff.”** This plague of hail, the seventh plague, is the first plague in which Moses was the one to stretch out his staff. The staff was not used in every plague, but before this, every time the staff was used, it was Aaron who held it. For three plagues, the seventh plague of hail, the eighth plague of locusts, and the ninth plague of darkness, Moses was the one who held up the staff, which then brought the plague (Exod. 9:23; 10:12; 10:22). The tenth plague, the death of the firstborn, was God’s doing, Moses and Aaron were not involved (Exod. 12:29).

Exd 9:27

**“I have sinned this time.”** Pharaoh is correct, he had sinned. He knew the will of God, and he defied it. God is the creator of the heavens and the earth and He makes the rules that humankind is to live by. When we humans ignore or defy God, that is sin, and there are consequences for it. Sometimes those consequences don’t show up until the Day of Judgment, but there are consequences for sin. Pharaoh will again say he sinned later, during the plague of locusts, but then as now he does not do what he says and he does not let Israel go (Exod. 10:16).

**“the righteous one.”** The Hebrew has the definite article so the word “righteous” is being used as a substantive, “the righteous one,” and the same is true with “the guilty ones.”

[For more on substantives, see commentary on Matt. 5:37.]

Exd 9:28

**“God’s thunder.”** The word “thunder” is the common word for “voice” or “sound,” but it is also used for “thunder.” However, sometimes the word “God” can be used as a superlative, such as “mighty thunder” (e.g., ASV, AMPC, CJB, KJV, NET, NLT). Also, the verse can be understood as the “voice of God” rather than the more common “thunder of God” (e.g., LSV). The thunder was “God’s thunder,” and “mighty thunder” indeed.

Exd 9:30

**“servants.”** In this context, it refers to Pharaoh’s officials and top army officers (see commentary on 2 Sam. 11:1).

**“you are not yet afraid of Yahweh God.”** The Hebrew is more literally, “you are not yet afraid of the face [or “presence”] of Yahweh God.

Exd 9:31

**“the barley were struck down because the barley was in the ear.”** The barley, now “in the ear” (almost fully formed) was destroyed. The barley would have been “in the ear” in late March or early April, so that gives us the time of the year of the seventh plague. At that late stage of development, the barley could not recover, whereas a couple months earlier it might have been able to be salvaged. Egypt lost its entire barley crop that year. Also, the flax was flowering. Barley is the first grain crop to mature in the Middle East, with flax shortly behind it. In Egypt, the barley was mature or almost mature, and the flax was flowering, so the Egyptians lost both those crops that year.

Exd 9:34

**“unyielding.”** The Hebrew word is *kabad* (#03513 כָּבַד), meaning unyielding, hard, insensitive, stubborn, unresponsive, dull. See commentary on Exodus 4:21 and 10:1.

**“he sinned again.”** This is the first time that the text says that Pharaoh sinned by hardening his heart and thus rebelling against God. Earlier, Pharaoh had said he sinned but he likely did not mean it (Exod. 9:27). In this case, however, he knew both the will of Yahweh and the power of Yahweh, and he ignored both of those things and actively defied Yahweh. He actively sinned. This is a very important point for us in being able to understand God’s justice and judgment that will be meted out on Judgment Day. God created humans, and He created us to serve and worship him, and bless and be a blessing to each other. We did not create ourselves, we cannot provide for everything we need without God’s help, and we cannot raise ourselves from the dead. These things are self-evident. The selfish and arrogant people who live for themselves and make their own rules and who ignore God’s guidance and commands are sinning, and the wages of sin is death (Rom. 6:23).

**“his servants.”** In this context, “servants” refers to the officials who serve the Pharaoh, not his household servants. The HSCB nuances this to “officials,” which is not literal but is very clear.

[For more on the word “servants” being used for people of high position in the kingdom, see commentary on 2 Sam. 11:1.]

Exd 9:35

**“the heart of Pharaoh remained hardened.”** The Hebrew text “remained hardened” is about a state of being, not a specific action. Pharaoh’s heart had been hard about letting the children of Israel go, and even after a severe plague, it remained hard.

[For more on God hardening Pharaoh’s heart, see commentary on Exod. 4:21.]

**Exodus Chapter 10**

Exd 10:1

**“unyielding.”** The Hebrew word is *kabad* (#03513 כָּבַד), meaning unyielding, hard, insensitive, stubborn, unresponsive, dull. Pharaoh’s heart was hard and unresponsive to God’s request, insensitive to both the Israelites and Egyptians, and dull such that it could not see where his refusal of God’s request would lead. See commentary on Exodus 4:21.

**“so that I set these signs of mine in their midst.”** God understood the position of Pharaoh’s heart—that Pharaoh would not let the Israelites go. So God designed consequences, the plagues, that would serve multiple purposes. For example, the plagues revealed God’s mercy, His power, and His dominance over other gods and goddesses. As just stated, one purpose of the plagues was to show God's mercy. God is merciful, and so He did not simply destroy Egypt right away and just have the Israelites leave Egypt. He cared for the Egyptian people as well as His own people and He wanted the Egyptian people to change their minds instead of being destroyed. In light of that, the plagues, although a hardship, were not totally destructive and over the months they escalated in severity to continue to reveal His mercy and give the Egyptians time to repent. At the same time that the sequence of the plagues revealed God’s mercy, another purpose of the plagues was to reveal His power and point to the fact that eventually, Egypt would have to relent and let Israel leave Egypt. Also, a third purpose for the plagues and the specific nature of each plague was to reveal that the gods of Egypt were powerless against Yahweh, the God of the Israelites. The plagues were designed to be a judgment against Egypt’s gods, just as Yahweh had said: “against all the gods of Egypt I will execute judgments: I am Yahweh” (Exod. 12:12).

Yahweh’s power over the gods of Egypt was very specific. Some of the gods who oversaw the Nile River were the god Hapi and the goddess was Anuket, and they could not protect the Nile from turning into blood. Similarly, the goddess Hequt was a frog-headed goddess who influenced fertility and birth, including the growth of the barley crop, but she could not keep the frogs from plaguing Egypt. The gods Serapia and Khepri, and the goddesses Wadject and Iusaaset were not able to protect Egypt during the third and fourth plague of insects and the eighth plague of locusts. Serapia was a locust-headed god who was supposed to protect from locusts, while Khepri was represented by a scarab beetle, and Wedjet and Iusaaset were supposed to help protect from flies and insects, but they were all powerless against Yahweh. The fifth plague was the death of the livestock in the field, and the sixth plague was boils on humans and animals. A widely worshiped goddess in Egypt was Hathor, who was often portrayed as a cow, and the well-known god Apis was often represented as a black bull, and one of the things he influenced was fertility. Mnevis and Buchis were also Egyptian gods who were portrayed as bulls. Yet those deities could not protect the Egyptian livestock. The ninth plague was the darkness that could be felt, and it is well-known that Ra, the sun god, was the primary god in Egypt. Yet Ra could not overcome Yahweh’s plague and give light to the nation of Egypt. Other gods and goddesses could be mentioned, because there were well over 1,000 gods and goddesses in the Egyptian pantheon, although not all were worshiped in every place and throughout all of Egpyt’s history. Still, there was enough diversity among the plagues that an amazing number of Egyptian gods and goddesses were shown to be powerless against Yahweh. The plagues in Egypt and the power of God were displayed so righteously and plainly that they became a very important part of the history of Israel, and God repeated to Israel many times that He was the God who brought Egypt out of slavery. The Jews spoke about that at the Passover celebration that occurred every spring.

In light of how openly God displayed that the Egyptian gods were powerless against Him, it shows the stubbornness and defiance in the human heart that within a couple of months of leaving Egypt, the Israelites made and worshiped a golden calf god just as they had in Egypt, and one wonders how much the sex that was attached to the worship of that god was part of the reason the people chose that bull god over Yahweh (cf. Exod. 32:6; 1 Kings 12:28).

Exd 10:2

**“I made a mockery of Egypt.”** The Hebrew is more than just, “what I did.” The Hebrew word can refer to mockery and this seems to be the case here (e.g., JPS, NAB, NASB, NET, NJB, NLT(2nd ed), RSV).

**“you will know that I am Yahweh.”** This is better understood as, “you will experience that I am Yahweh” (see commentary on Exod. 6:7).

Exd 10:3

**“How long will you refuse to humble yourself before me?”** This verse highlights the free will that God gave humankind. God gave angels and humans free will so they could worship Him by choice and not because they were forced to. Many spirit beings and human beings use their free will to defy God and stand against His desire and will. Nevertheless, although God gave angels and humans the free will ability to defy Him, He did not give that to last forever without consequences. That is a good thing because genuinely evil people will not choose to repent or to die, so if they could, they would go on living and tormenting the rest of God’s creation forever. So God set life up such that people, by conscious mental choice of by their actions, make their own choice as to whether they will live or die (cf. Deut. 6:19-20; Ezek. 18:23; 33:11). The wages of sin is death (Rom. 6:23), and on Judgment Day every human will be judged and will either be granted everlasting life or be thrown into the Lake of Fire where they will eventually die.

[For more on free will, see Appendix 9: “On Calvinism and Predestination.” For more on dying in the Lake of Fire, see Appendix 4: “Annihilation in the Lake of Fire.”]

Exd 10:5

**“they will cover the surface of the earth.”** The Hebrew uses the idiomatic phrase, they will cover the “eye” of the land. This phrase also occurs in verses such as Exodus 10:15, and Numbers 22:5, 11. The “eye” of the earth likely refers to the faculty of seeing, and thus visibility. The people could not see the land, the ground, and the ground could not “see” them because of the dense numbers of locusts that covered the ground.

Exd 10:6

**“he turned and went out.”** This statement is harsher than what we have seen in the past.

Exd 10:7

**“Egypt has perished.”** This is a hyperbolic statement because Egypt had not actually “perished.” On the other hand, however, Egypt was in bad shape, so in their desperation to communicate that fact to Pharaoh they exaggerated the situation, but understandably so. In emotional situations we humans tend to exaggerate.

Exd 10:8

**“But who—who is going?”** Although most English versions try to smooth out the English, cf. “But exactly who will be going” (CSB), both the Literal Standard Version (LSV) and Young’s Literal Translation (YLT) double the “who” like the Hebrew text does. Pharaoh did not want to let the Israelites go, but the power of God was forcing him to. So he is getting this declaration to let the Israelites go pulled out of him against what he really wants to do, and his hesitation and lack of desire produce what amounts to a stuttering statement.

Exd 10:10

**“See, evil is before your faces.”** This statement is ambiguous, and the scholars and English versions are divided on it. The majority of the scholars think that it refers to Moses and the Israelites having an evil plan (ESV, NASB). But other scholars believe that it refers to Pharaoh warning Moses, not to push him too hard or there would be consequences (cf. CSB, NET). However, it is possible that Pharaoh was purposely ambiguous, and meant the statement to be understood both ways.[[19]](#footnote-19614)

Exd 10:13

**“an east wind.”** An east wind would come from the Arabian desert across the Sinai peninsula and into Egypt. A strong east wind, which would normally bring sand and dust, now brought locusts.

Exd 10:15

**“surface.”** The Hebrew is “eye.” See commentary on Exodus 10:5.

**“darkened.”** The land was likely darkened in two different ways. When locusts swarm in the air, sometimes the swarm is so thick that the light of the sun is blocked out. Also, when the locusts land on the ground, they cover the ground so thickly that it is darkened.

Exd 10:16

**“I have sinned.”** See commentary on Exodus 9:27, when Pharaoh said the same thing.

Exd 10:17

**“once more.”** Pharaoh had said he had sinned earlier, when he wanted the seventh plague, the plague of hail, to stop, and although the text doesd not specifically say he asked forgiveness for his sin, in effect he did, because the plague stopped (Exod 9:27). Other English translations have the idea “once more” as well (cf. CSB, Douay Rheims, NIV).

**“this death.”** Here the word “death” is put by metonymy for that which was causing death, the locusts. But using “death” here is punchy and powerful, and the meaning is clearly understood.

Exd 10:20

**“Yahweh hardened Pharaoh’s heart.”** See commentary on Exodus 4:21.

Exd 10:22

**“total darkness.”** The Hebrew text uses two different words for darkness, e.g., “darkness, darkness,” but the second word also suggests fear and terror. The translation “total darkness” attempts to bring out that fear factor a little bit. The Shocken Bible has “gloomy darkness” apparently trying to pick up that sense as well. The same two words for darkness appear in Joel 2:2 and Isa. 59:9.

Exd 10:23

**“They did not see one another.”** This miracle of “darkness darkness” seemed to extinguish even oil lamp and torch light. No one could see anyone else.

Exd 10:26

**“We do not know how we are to serve Yahweh until we arrive there.”** This would be true. The revelation about how to properly sacrifice to God did not come until later when God gave the Law and the instructions for the sacrifices, which are mostly in Leviticus.

Exd 10:27

**“Yahweh hardened Pharaoh’s heart.”** See commentary on Exodus 4:21.

Exd 10:28

**“Get away from me!”** This is how the confrontation ended after the ninth plague, the plague of darkness. In the at least six months since the plagues started (and it could well have been much longer than that), there had been increasing animosity between Pharaoh and Moses. In the first plague, which was the water turning to blood, Pharaoh simply walked away (Exod. 7:23). In the second plague, the plague of frogs, the text says Moses simply “went out” from Pharaoh, and that vocabulary was also used in the fourth plague, the plague of insects, and the seventh plague, the plague of hail (Exod. 8:12; 8:30; 9:33). In the eighth plague, the plague of locusts, Moses “turned and went out,” which was an escalation of emotion and action (Exod. 10:6), and later on, Pharaoh drove them away from his presence (Exod. 10:11). Now, here in Exodus 10:28, we see Pharaoh’s final dismissal, which is harsh and is accompanied by a threat.

Exd 10:29

**“I will never see your face again.”** The Bible never says Moses left Pharaoh’s presence right after this. He is still speaking to Pharaoh in Exodus 11:8.

**Exodus Chapter 11**

Exd 11:1

**“drive, yes, drive.”** This is the figure of speech polyptoton (see commentary on Gen. 2:16).

Exd 11:4

**“midnight.”** The Hebrew is “half.” The night went from 6 PM to 6 AM, so at midnight the night was “half” over.

**“I will go out into Egypt.”** Many English versions have the word “midst,” but the Hebrew text does not have to be translated that way (e.g., BBE, CEB, Douay-Rheims, NRSV). Yahweh said to Moses, “I will go out,” but God went through an agent, an angel.

Exd 11:5

**“all the firstborn in the land of Egypt will die.”** This was the firstborn male children, as per Exodus 13:15. If a girl was the firstborn child, she did not die, but her firstborn brother did.

**“Pharaoh who sits on his throne...the firstborn of the female slave who sits behind the handmill.”** Although the second word “sits” is added, the idea for it is brought forward from Pharaoh who “sits.” Both Pharaoh and the slave girl who grinds grain with a handmill sit while they work. “From Pharaoh to the slave” is a graphic picture of the totality of society, from the most powerful male to the lowliest slave girl—no one would escape the death of their firstborn male child. In fact, many of the firstborn males in Egypt at the time were likely in powerful positions in the kingdom and would be Pharaoh’s army officers, high officials, and even some of his magicians. We can be sure that in many families, a grandparent, parent, and grandchild all died that night.

**“all the firstborn of the livestock.”** God smote the firstborn of the animals because many of them were worshiped by the Egyptians, and the plagues were judgments against the Egyptians and against their gods (Exod. 12:12).

Exd 11:6

**“There will be a great cry.”** Middle Eastern people are known for being very expressive of their feelings of both joy and grief, and weep and wail loudly when disaster hits. The death of every firstborn male in Egypt in one night would raise a cry of grief unlike anything that had been experienced in Egypt (and likely on earth) before.

Exd 11:7

**“growl against.”** The Hebrew text is an idiom, literally, “no dog will even sharpen its tongue against.” This is hyperbole, but well put because dogs can be dangerous. “Sharpen its tongue” is an obscure idiom. It likely means “bark against,” or “growl against,” or something very similar. In other words, as Israel left Egypt, Israel would not be threatened. But this only lasted for a short time. Soon the Egyptian army was after them.

Exd 11:8

**“All these your servants.”** This is an example of the word “servants” referring to the army officers and officials of Pharaoh (see commentary on 2 Sam. 11:1).

**“will come down to me.”** It was customary for Pharaoh to sit on an elevated platform so that he was above the people who were “below” him (both physically and socially). Solomon also had a throne that was above all the people (1 Kings 10:18-20). Pharaoh would have his most senior officials with him on the platform, and Moses said that when this last plague hit Egypt, Pharaoh’s officials would come down off the platform and bow before Moses and tell him to get out of Egypt.

**“bow down.”** The common biblical way of bowing down before people or God was to fall to one’s knees and bow the upper body to the earth. It is the same Hebrew word as “worship.”

**“He went out from Pharaoh in hot anger.”** This was likely due to Pharaoh threatening to kill him.

[For more on bowing down, see Word Study: “Worship.”]

Exd 11:9

**“Yahweh had said to Moses.”** Exodus 11:9-10 are a summary statement, briefly recapping how Egypt and Israel had gotten to where they are now.

Exd 11:10

**“Moses and Aaron had done all these wonders before Pharaoh.”** This summarizes why there had to be a tenth plague—the other plagues did not convince Pharaoh to let the Israelites go.

**“Yahweh hardened Pharaoh’s heart.”** See commentary on Exodus 4:21.

**Exodus Chapter 12**

Exd 12:2

**“This month is.”** The verb in the sentence should be in the present tense.

**“the beginning of months for you.”** This is important to understand the accurate chronology of Israel. From Adam to the Exodus, over 2,500 years, the first month of the year for God’s people had been Tishri and the seventh month had been Abib (also called Nisan). Now, here at the time of the Exodus from Egypt, God reverses things. The first month of the new religious year became Nisan and the seventh month Tishri. The effect of that change was that God made a religious calendar and a civil calendar. The civil calendar started with Tishri, which is why Tishri 1 is called “Rosh Hashana” (literally, the “The head of the year” from *rosh*, “head”). The first month of the religious calendar was Nisan. Ordinarily, the Bible counts via the religious year, which is why the Bible recognizes Rosh Hashana (Tishri 1), but says it is in the seventh month (Lev. 23:24). God continued to count some things from Tishri, for example, the Sabbath years were counted from the month Tishri, not the month Nisan.

Technically, the Hebrew is “the new,” but it was a word that in a calendar context referred to the new moon, or month. It is possible that the very day that God said this to Moses was the actual first day of Nisan, because they would not select a lamb until the tenth of the month, which was still future, and the Passover was the 14th of the month and they left Egypt the next day, the 15th of Nisan, and by that time they had had time to pack up their stuff and ask the neighbors for precious things. So when God said that this new moon was the beginning of the year, He could have picked Nisan 1 to say that.

Israel uses a lunar month, which is shorter than a solar month which we Westerners use, so the dates on the Israel calendar are not the same every year on our calendar, they shift. Nisan usually falls in our April, while Tishri usually falls in our September.

Exd 12:3

**“on the tenth day of this month.”** The Israelites crossed the Jordan River on the tenth day of the first month exactly 40 years later (Josh. 4:19).

**“everyone among them.”** As one reads, it becomes clear that “everyone” means every man who is the head of a household. Generally, men married by age 16, so from a cultural point of view, “every man” did lead a household. However, there would be some exceptions, and those men would be part of their father’s household.

Exd 12:4

**“according to the number of people.”** The Hebrew is more literally, “according to the number of person souls,” a rare wording.

**“according to what everyone can eat.”** Since nothing could be left over, it was important to eat as much of the lamb or goat as possible. Also, the lamb was to be eaten in one place (Exod. 12:46).

Exd 12:5

**“Your lamb must be without blemish, a male a year old.”** The Passover lamb was one of the great types of Christ in the Old Testament. Like the Messiah, it had to be a male without blemish. Jesus had no “blemish,” he was without sin.

**“You are to take it from the sheep or from the goats.”** We regularly speak of the “Passover lamb,” but the animal could be a “Passover goat.” Both the lamb and goat were Levitically clean animals.

Exd 12:6

**“keep it safe.”** The Hebrew word means to keep it safe, not just “keep” it.[[20]](#footnote-26094) Animals hurt each other or are hurt by predators, so once the lamb was picked, it was important to protect it so it would stay without blemish until it could be sacrificed.

**“in the evening.”** The Hebrew text literally reads, “between the evenings,” which is when the Passover lamb was sacrificed (Exod. 12:6). In the biblical culture, “evening” was used in two different ways to apply to two different periods of time. Joseph Thayer writes that it was: “either from our three to six o’clock p.m., …or from our six o’clock p.m. to the beginning of night.”[[21]](#footnote-24920)

That the people in the biblical culture thought of evening in terms of an early evening and a later evening explains verses in the Hebrew text that use the phrase “between the evenings” (e.g., Exod. 12:6; 16:12; 29:39, 41; 30:8; Lev. 23:5; Num. 9:3, 5, 11; 28:4, 8. See YLT, LSV, and Rotherham’s Emphasized Bible). The early evening began about 3 PM, when the sun was noticeably beginning to go down, while the later evening began about 6 PM and lasted until darkness noticeably began.

The cultural use of “evening” beginning at 3 p.m. also explains why the daily afternoon sacrifice, which was killed around 3 p.m., was called “the evening sacrifice.” Jesus had died at 3 p.m., and according to biblical culture, “evening” had come.

Exd 12:9

**“its head with its legs and its inner parts.”** The Bible does not command that all of the animal be eaten, just that it is all roasted. However, some of the inner parts may have been eaten, but if they weren’t, they were destroyed the next day. That the whole animal was roasted is part of the Passover lamb being a type of Christ (1 Cor. 5:7).

Exd 12:10

**“if any of it remains until morning you must burn it with fire.”** The Passover lamb was to be eaten in one day, part of the typology between the Passover lamb and Christ. Christ was crucified and died the same day. He did not hang on the cross overnight.

Exd 12:11

**“with your belt on your waist, your sandals on your feet.”** The Passover was eaten in haste, and the people were to dress as if they were ready to leave quickly. That is what happened in Egypt, the people packed and left in a hurry.

**“and your staff in your hand.”** In the culture of the times, almost every male would have a staff that he walked with. It served multiple purposes: stability, defense, and even on occasion carrying things. Having a staff was so common that it is mentioned here without comment.

Exd 12:12

**“I will go through the land of Egypt.”** Yahweh goes through Egypt through His agent, called the destroyer (Exod. 12:23). For more on the custom of agency, see commentary on Matthew 8:5).

**“on that night.”** The Passover lamb (or goat; Exod. 12:5) was to be killed “between the evenings” on the 14th of Nisan (Exod. 12:6). The meal would last into the night, and thus into the 15th of Nisan (the new day began at sunset). This meant that the firstborn in Egypt died on the 15th of Nisan, and the Egyptians drove Israel out of Egypt that very night (Exod 12:29-37). Thus the Exodus from Egypt began on the 15th of Nisan.

**“and will strike down all the firstborn.”** The “firstborn” refers to the firstborn males, not the females (see commentary on Exod. 11:5).

**“against all the gods of Egypt I will execute judgments. I am Yahweh.”** Although some of the “gods” of Egypt may have been just figments of someone’s imagination, most of them would not have been. Demons can take on many shapes and sizes, and would definitely appear as “gods” to ancient people. As witches can testify, when spirits (demons) come into concretion they can talk and they would become the gods of the ancient world. Apparently, Egypt had many “gods” that directed and controlled much of what went on in the country, and in doing what He did, Yahweh executed judgments against those “gods” of Egypt.

Exd 12:13

**“a sign for you.”** The blood on the doorpost was a sign for the Israelites, marking their belief in God’s power and promise to protect and deliver them.

Exd 12:14

**“This day will be a memorial for you.”** For more information and a list of the feasts and sabbaths in Israel, see commentary on Leviticus 23:2.

Exd 12:15

**“Seven days you must eat unleavened bread.”** “Unleavened bread” is bread made without any leaven (yeast). The Feast of Unleavened Bread was a seven-day feast, like the Feast of Booths (less accurately called the “Feast of Tabernacles”), but in time an eighth day was added to the Feast of Booths so that it became in effect an eight-day feast; note that also in Nehemiah 8:18, and that eighth day is the “great day” of the feast (John 7:37).

**“that soul will be cut off.”** This same phrase occurs in Exodus 12:19 (see commentary on Exod. 12:19).

Exd 12:16

**“that alone may be prepared by you.”** The Jews were not to make a fire on the Sabbath (Exod. 35:3), but they could keep one going from the day before. The Law allows for a person to mix up and heat the food that is eaten on the Sabbath. The Jews had hot food on the Sabbath, and could keep a fire going from the day before to cook and to stay warm if it was cold outside.

Exd 12:17

**“for in this same day I brought your armies out.”** This is referring to the day that Israel started out of Egypt. It took Israel a much longer time to actually leave the national territory of Egypt.

**“I brought your armies out.”** The orderly way that Israel gathered themselves and marched, and camped, was a major reason to refer to Israel as an “army.” This verse is not referring to an actual “army” formed out of the fighting men of Israel.

Exd 12:19

**“will be cut off.”** The Hebrew can be translated as “will be cut off” or “must be cut off,” and the scholars disagree as to the meaning. If the translation is “must,” then it is up to humans to execute this judgment. However, if it is “will be,” then the execution of the sentence is left up to God and His action and timing.[[22]](#footnote-28248)

**“whether he is a sojourner or one who is a native of the land.”** The scholars and the versions are divided over what Exodus 12:19 means. Some think that the “sojourner” is a “foreigner” who is living in Israel and translate the Hebrew text that way. Other scholars feel the “sojourner” is a Jew who is traveling outside of Israel and may, for that reason, think that he does not have to participate in a Passover celebration. Douglas Stuart says this verse pertains to both those possibilities at one time, which is most likely correct.

Stuart writes: “These verses reword and expand slightly on v. 15, adding mainly the clarification that ‘whoever’ applies to everyone ‘whether he is an alien or native-born,’ and that the law has no spatial or geographical limitation (‘Wherever you live, you must eat unleavened bread’). Thus future generations of God’s people were not to make the mistake of excluding relative newcomers who wanted to show their covenant loyalty to their (newly accepted) Lord merely because those persons were not yet accepted as Israelite citizens; neither was anyone to feel entitled to an exemption from full observance because he or she was far away from the land of Israel, proper or living in isolation from other Israelites.”[[23]](#footnote-13714)

Exd 12:20

**“in all your dwelling places.”** That is, inside or outside of Israel.

Exd 12:21

**“slaughter the Passover.”** The Passover animal, whether sheep or goat, had to be killed, skinned, and otherwise slaughtered and prepared to cook. In this context, “the Passover” is being used by metonymy for the Passover sacrifice. Many English versions supply an object, such as “kill the Passover lamb,” or “kill the Passover animal,” but the sacrificial animal is so intimately tied to the Passover that here the animal is called “the Passover.”

Exd 12:22

**“a bundle.”** The hyssop did not need to be tied into a bundle. The text just means something like “a handful.” Many English translations say “a bunch,” but in vernacular English that means “a whole lot,” and implies too much. The person only needed a few pieces of hyssop to dip into the blood.

**“the lintel.”** The lintel is the bar on top of the two sideposts of the door that supports the roof above the door.

Exd 12:27

**“kneeled and bowed down.”** This kneeling preceded bowing down to the ground. The two actions, kneeling and then bowing to the ground blended into one act of homage or worship. The common biblical way of bowing down before people or God was to fall to one’s knees and bow the upper body and face to the earth. Also, instead of “kneeled and bowed down,” the text could be translated “bowed down and worshiped,” with “kneeling” being understood as part of the process of bowing down, and “bowing down” was the act of worship. The same Hebrew verb, *shachah* (#07812 שָׁחָה), is translated as both “bow down” and “worship;” traditionally “worship” if God is involved and “bow down” if people are involved, but the verb and action are the same, the act of bowing down is the worship.

[For more on bowing down, see Word Study: “Worship.”]

Exd 12:29

**“And at midnight.”** The Israelites were to kill and begin to eat the Passover meal on the 14th of Nisan (Exod. 12:18). The 14th of Nisan ended and the next day, 15th of Nisan, started at sunset, and Yahweh struck down the firstborn “at midnight” and therefore on the 15th of Nisan. Here the record changes from instruction to historical event. Exodus 12:1-28 had occurred before the tenth of Nisan (the first month) and were instructions of what Israel was to do: select a lamb or goat on the tenth (Exod. 12:3, 5), kill it on the 14th and put the blood on the doorposts (Exod. 12:6-7), and Yahweh would pass through on the 15th (Exod. 12:12; the fifteenth started at sunset). Exodus 12:29 switches to the 15th of Nisan and Yahweh moving powerfully against Egypt.

[For the timing from the Exodus to the census in Numbers 1:2, including the setting up of the Tabernacle, the events of Leviticus, and the start of the census in the Book of Numbers, see commentary on Num. 1:1.]

**“struck down all the firstborn.”** The “firstborn” refers to the firstborn males, not the females, and was also stated in Exodus 12:12 (see commentary on Exod. 11:5). Years earlier the Egyptians had killed all the male children of Israel and families wept; now the Egyptian families were weeping. The firstborn male in any family is usually especially honored, and so the weeping and wailing would have been intense.

**“midnight.”** The Passover Lamb was killed on the 14th day of the month Nisan, and at sunset, the 14th day changed to the 15th day, (the Jewish day started at sunset; in most of the Western world the new day starts at midnight) so the Israelites left Egypt on Nisan 15. Israel had a lunar calendar, and the 15th day of the lunar month was always a full moon, so the Israelites had plenty of light to travel by when they left that night.

**“all the firstborn of the livestock.”** God smote the firstborn of the animals because many of them were worshiped by the Egyptians, and the plagues were judgments against the Egyptians and against their gods (Exod. 12:12). This had been stated earlier (cf. Exod. 11:5).

Exd 12:34

**“along with their kneading troughs.”** Kneading dough is essential in making bread, and bread was such a staple and foundational food among the Israelites that when they left Egypt, the Bible says they took their kneading troughs with them. “Kneading troughs” is historically more accurate than “kneading bowls,” because the dough was usually kneaded in a trough-shaped wooden vessel; it was rectangular and longer than it was wide. Making a kneading trough out of hardwood was a lengthy process, so they were expensive and very valuable to the family.

Exd 12:36

**“Thus they plundered Egypt.”** This is what God commanded in Exodus 3:22.

Exd 12:37

**“thousand.”** The word may not mean a thousand here, but may refer to family groups or clans. The evidence is divided. Some translations seem to favor 600,000 men, and some seem to favor 600 army groups of fighting men, which if a group was 20 men, would be 12,000 men. In any case, the group seems to be a subdivision of a tribe (see [NET text notes](https://classic.net.bible.org/verse.php?book=Exo&chapter=12&verse=37&tab=commentaries) on Exod. 12:37 and Num. 1:21).

The word for “thousand” in Hebrew is *aleph*, but it can refer to a unit smaller than 1000. For example, in reference to Gideon, *aleph* referred to his family or clan, a number certainly smaller than 1000 (Judges 6:15; cf. 1 Sam. 10:19). Also, *aleph* can have military associations because it stems from the verb “to train.” This probably originated in connection with training oxen, but in a military context, it would have referred to training for battle. In modern Hebrew, an *aluph* is a military general. Just as with “clan,” in a military context, *aleph* likely represented a smaller number than 1000 and simply referred to a military unit.

How many Israelites were in the Exodus from Egypt? In several places, the Bible seems to suggest that the Israelites involved in the Exodus and Conquest numbered well over two million people (e.g., Ex. 12:37; Num. 1:46; Num. 26:51). Exodus 12:37 mentions “about 600 *aleph*, but does aleph mean 1000 here? Or, could *aleph* designate military units of fighting men? The Hebrew text reads more literally, “about 600 *aleph* feet of [fighting] men.” There are some reasons, including biblical reasons, for understanding that the number of Israelites that came out of Egypt was much smaller than 600,000 fighting men. The reasons include that all evidences of population in the Ancient Near East, including Canaan, are of lower numbers. A migration of over 2 million people does not fit with what we know of the history of the situation in the Middle East. Also, fortified sites like Jericho would not even be a bump in the road to a fighting force of 600,000 soldiers.

Also, the Bible says that Israel was smaller than the peoples populating the land of Canaan. For example, in Exodus 23:29-30 God says, “I will not drive them [the Canaanites] out from before you in one year, lest the land become desolate and the animals of the field multiply against you. Little by little I will drive them out from before you until you have increased *in number* and taken possession of the land.”

Also, Deuteronomy 7:1 reads, “When Yahweh your God brings you into the land that you are entering to take possession of it, and he clears away many nations from your presence, the Hittite and the Girgashite and the Amorite and the Canaanite and the Perizzite and the Hivite and the Jebusite, seven nations greater and mightier than you….” Also, Deuteronomy 7:7 says, “Yahweh did not set his love on you and choose you because you were more in number than any *other* people, because you were the fewest of all peoples.” Then, Deuteronomy 9:1 confirms that and says, “Hear, O Israel! Today you are to cross over the Jordan to go in to dispossess nations greater and mightier than you.”

How big a human army did God want or need for Israel to drive out nations that were larger in number than they were? One of the evidences that God was with Israel and was bringing them into the Land of Canaan was that Israel was smaller in number than the nations it was defeating. The smaller army chased out the larger just as God had said: “Five of you will chase 100, and 100 of you will chase 10,000; and your enemies will fall before you by the sword” (Lev. 26:8).

God made it plain to Israel that it was going to be by His power that Israel would defeat its enemies (Deut. 4:37-38; 7:1-2). That Israel, the smaller nation, defeated many larger nations made it plain to everyone that a powerful God was with Israel. Humanly speaking, an army of 600,000 would not need God’s help to defeat the nations in Canaan.

The Israelites in the Book of Exodus are presented as a nation of slaves whom God delivered from Egypt and then enlisted into His army. That might explain why the Israelites are counted by families as if in military units. If we assume a standard military unit/*aleph* of 12-24 per unit, that means 600 *aleph* would be between 7,200-14,400 fighting men. That would likely make the total number of Israelites—men, women, and children—coming out of Egypt between 30,000-60,000 people; not an insignificant number, but not two million people. However, in spite of the likelihood of *aleph* referring to a small military unit, the bottom line is that we do not really know.

Exd 12:38

**“A mixed multitude went up also with them.”** The Israelites were accompanied by a number of non-Israelites when they left Egypt. This “mixed multitude” would have included Egyptians. However, due to its power and prestige, Egypt attracted a lot of people of different backgrounds, and so it is quite certain that this “mixed multitude” was truly mixed, and it also almost certainly included slaves—people who had been enslaved in Egypt—and took advantage of the situation to escape. The Bible does not tell us if the people who left Egypt with the Israelites believed in Yahweh or not. Surely some of them did, but some of them may have just wanted to leave Egypt and so went out with the Israelites. The miracles that were being done by Moses may not have convinced Pharaoh, but they no doubt convinced a lot of people that the God of Moses was truly powerful, and that would have been attractive to many people.

Although the non-Israelites could get circumcised and follow Israelite laws and customs, there were some non-Israelites who through the years caused trouble for Israel (e.g., Num. 11:4).

Exd 12:39

**“cakes.”** The bread in biblical times was baked in round, flat loaves, very much like the modern pancake.

Exd 12:40

**“was 430 years.”** Many people read this verse and think that the Israelites spent 430 years in Egypt, but this is not the case. Furthermore, they did not spend 400 years as slaves in Egypt, even though many people think Genesis 15:13 says that. The total length of time from the year when God called Abraham out of Haran until the year of the Exodus when God made the “Old Covenant” with Israel, was 430 years. This “hard date” is set in Galatians 3:16-17, which says there are 430 years from the promise to Abraham until the Law, which was given the year of the Exodus from Egypt. In light of that, there is no way Israel spent 400 years in slavery in Egypt, as many people believe. The 430-year period from the promise God made to Abraham (Gen. 12:2-3) until the Exodus included Abraham’s life until Isaac was born, Isaac’s life until Jacob was born, Jacob’s life until Joseph was born, Joseph’s 110-year life; and the slavery in Egypt. As we will see, the slavery lasted no longer than 139 years. It is worth noting the Septuagint says that the time the children of Israel spent “in Egypt and Canaan” was 430 years.

The chronology of the Old Testament has been confused by many things. For one thing, too many scholars rely on the accepted Egyptian chronology to guide them in understanding biblical chronology despite the fact there is very good evidence that the accepted Egyptian dates are wrong.[[24]](#footnote-10981) Also, the way some of the verses in the Hebrew text are written, it is easy to get the wrong impression from them unless one takes the time to study the specifics of the chronology of the Old Testament to see how they fit with the scope of Scripture. Genesis 15:13 and Exodus 12:40 are some of the verses that can be confusing.

Genesis 15:13 and Acts 7:6 say that the length of time between Abraham’s “seed” and the Exodus is 400 years, and this supports the 430-year number as being the time between God’s promise to Abraham (Gen. 12:2-4) until the Exodus. It is good that God repeats the number 400 a couple of times because at first glance it seems wrong. If the total time between God’s promise to Abraham and the Exodus was 430 years, and the time between Abraham’s “seed” and the Exodus was 400 years, then the time between the promise and the “seed” is 30 years. But God made the promise to Abraham when he was 75 (Gen. 12:4), but Isaac was born when Abraham was 100 (Gen. 21:1-5), which is only 25 years, not 30. How do we get the extra five years?

In this case, the counting of the years of the “seed” of Abraham that would inherit the promise does not start with the birth of Isaac, but the weaning of Isaac. Abraham had two sons, Ishmael and Isaac, and until Isaac was weaned, Ishmael, the elder of the two, seemed to be legitimately in line to inherit the promise. But at the weaning feast of Isaac, God made it clear that Ishmael was to be sent away and Isaac was established as the real “seed” of Abraham (Gen. 21:8-13). Thus, the counting of the “seed” of Abraham, i.e., when Isaac was established as “the seed,” starts at Isaac’s weaning feast when God told Abraham, “it is through Isaac that your seed will be called” (Gen. 21:12).

Admittedly, there is no verse that gives Isaac’s age as five years old when he was weaned and Abraham put on the weaning feast. But God expects us to use wisdom and knowledge in interpreting Scripture, and there are several places in the chronology of the Old Testament where God gives us outside parameters and expects us to fill in some of the details from the scope of Scripture. This is one of those cases, and a number of competent biblical scholars have noted that Isaac would have been five when God told Abraham that he was the heir.[[25]](#footnote-13464)

In summary: God appeared to Abraham when he was in Mesopotamia before he dwelt in Haran and told him to go “into the land which I shall show thee,” but there is no record that God gave Abraham a promise at that time (Gen. 11:31; Neh. 9:7; Acts 7:2-3). When Abraham was 75 and living in Haran, God made a promise to him that he would inherit the land (Gen. 12:2-3), and Abraham got up and went into the land of Canaan, the Promised Land (Gen. 12:4-5). Isaac was weaned 30 years after God promised the land to Abraham, and at the weaning feast, God told Abraham that his seed would be called in Isaac. Thus, there are 400 years from the “seed” to the Exodus (Gen. 15:13; Acts 7:6). So we see that the length of time between the promise to Abraham and the Exodus was 430 years (Exod. 12:40; Gal. 3:16-17). Also, the length of time between Abraham’s seed—the weaning of Isaac—and the Exodus was 400 years (Acts 7:6; Gen. 15:13).

**Summary of the Chronology of the 430 Years from the Promise to the Law**

* Isaac was weaned 30 years after Abraham was promised the land (so **30** years for Abraham, between the Promise and “the seed”).
* Isaac was 60 years old when Jacob was born. (Gen. 25:26) (so 60 years for Isaac + 30 for Abraham = **90** total years from the promise).
* Jacob was 91 years old when Joseph was born. That is calculated from:
  + Genesis 41:46 – Joseph was 30 when he stood before the pharaoh.
  + Genesis 41:53 – the seven years of plenty had ended (= seven years).
  + Genesis 41:54; 45:6 – the second year of famine had set in (= two years).
  + Genesis 47:9 – Jacob was 130 years old when he stood before the pharaoh (Jacob died at 147; Gen. 47:28).
  + So: Jacob is 130 when Joseph is 39 (30 + 7 + 2), so Joseph was born when Jacob was 91 (so 91 years for Jacob + the 90 years for Abraham and Isaac = **181** total years from the promise).
* Joseph lived for 110 years (Gen. 50:26) (so 110 years for Joseph + 181 years = **291** total years from the promise to Joseph’s death; that is, 30 + 60 + 91 + 110 = 291 total years).
* If Israel was enslaved the same year Joseph died (which did not happen), there would have been 139 years of slavery (430 total years - 291 years from the promise to the death of Joseph = 139 years of slavery at most). These 139 years are certainly less than the 400 years that most Christians think the slavery lasted. But Israel being enslaved by Egypt would have happened some years after Joseph’s death, not the year he died or even only shortly after it. A new Pharaoh had to arise who did not know Joseph (Exod. 1:8), and it was he who enslaved Israel.
* How long were the Israelites slaves in Egypt? The Bible does not give us an exact number of years, but we can make an educated guess. There is a gap of years between the death of Joseph and the birth of Moses, and Israel’s slavery started in that gap, which we will see is 59 years. There are 139 years from the death of Joseph to the Exodus, so 139 is the absolute maximum that Israel could have been in slavery. Moses was 80 at the Exodus (Exod. 7:7), and was born in slavery, so the maximum years of slavery (139 years) minus the 80 years of Moses’ life gives us 59 years as the gap years between Joseph’s death and Moses’ birth, and it was during that gap that Israel’s slavery started. But the slavery did not start the year Joseph died, nor did it start the year Moses was born. Sometime in the 59 years between Joseph’s death and Moses’ birth, Israel was enslaved. So, how long after Joseph died did the slavery start? The Bible does not say, but it does say that the Pharaoh who knew Joseph died, and a new Pharaoh who did not know Joseph came to the throne, became fearful of Israel, and then enslaved them. If we assume Pharaoh’s death and replacement took 30 years, then that would mean Israel was enslaved for 29 years before Moses was born, so we can add that 29 years to the 80 years of Moses’ life in slavery, which would make Israel’s slavery in Egypt 109 years. Or, if we say the death of Pharaoh and replacing him took 20 years, then Israel’s slavery would have been 119 years. Given the parameters, perhaps a period of slavery of 100-120 years would be a good appropriate estimate, and that is still a long time to be in slavery and for Israel to remember their hard slavery in Egypt.

In the calculations above, we see the actual chronology of the time between God’s promise to Abraham and the Exodus and the giving of the Law to Moses. To fully understand Exodus 12:40, it is imperative that we translate it accurately. The KJV translates it as: “Now the sojourning of the children of Israel, who dwelt in Egypt, *was* four hundred and thirty years.” To properly interpret the verse, we must understand that the phrase, “who dwelt in Egypt,” does not describe the 430-year period, but rather is a description of the children of Israel—they are the ones who lived in Egypt.

Exodus 12:40 should not be interpreted to mean that the children of Israel spent 430 years in Egypt. Instead, it can be translated as: “Now the time of the sojourn of the children of Israel (who lived in Egypt) was 430 years.” Read that way, it is the “sojourn” of the children of Israel that was 430 years; it was not Israel’s time in Egypt that was 430 years. The sojourn of the children of Israel started when God promised Abraham the land, and so he went into it (Gen. 12:1-4). God stopped counting the years of the sojourn at the Exodus, at which time He began to count the years of another great period of Israel’s history, the 480 years from the Exodus until Solomon started building the Temple (1 Kings 6:1).

Genesis 15:13 should be read and understood in the same basic way as Exodus 12:40 in that there is a parenthesis in the verse. Genesis 15:13 (REV): “And he said to Abram, ‘Know for certain that your seed will live as foreigners in a land that is not theirs (and will serve them and they will afflict them) 400 years.” As with Exodus 12:40, this verse is not, indeed, cannot be, saying that Israel will be enslaved for 400 years. It is saying the people of Israel will live in a land that is not theirs for 400 years, and at some time during that period, they will serve and be enslaved. And that is what happened. God promised Abraham and his descendants the land, and then Abraham traveled there. But he did not get to take possession of it, and neither did his descendants. They lived as “foreigners” there and in Egypt until after the Exodus, when Joshua conquered the land.

As they are commonly (but mistakenly!) understood to read, Genesis 15:13 contradicts Exodus 12:40. That is because if Israel lived in Egypt for 430 years as Exodus 12:40 seems to say in most versions, but they were enslaved for 400 years as Genesis 15:13 seems to say in most versions, then the period of slavery would be too long and Genesis 15:13 and Exodus 12:40 would contradict each other. Here is why: if the people of Israel lived in Egypt for 430 years (Exod. 12:40), and were enslaved for 400 years (Gen. 15:13), that leaves only 30 years when the Israelites were not slaves. But Joseph was 30 when he was taken before Pharaoh and given rule over Egypt (Gen. 41:46), and then there were seven years of plenty and two years of famine when Jacob and the people of Israel came into Egypt; Joseph would have been 39 (Gen. 45:6). Then Joseph’s family lived with him in Egypt until he died at 110 (Gen. 50:26). But that means they lived with Joseph for 71 years before he died (110 - 39 = 71), so even if the slavery started that very year, the longest the slavery could have been was 359 years (430 - 71 = 359). But we know it took some time after Joseph died for Israel to be enslaved. If it took only ten years, that would leave only 349 years of slavery. But the common reading of Genesis 15:13 is that the slavery was 400 years—so the traditional reading of Genesis 15:13 does not even fit with the traditional reading of Exodus 12:40.

The study of biblical chronology is detailed and involved, and many scholars have worked on it for centuries, one scholar building upon the work of another. The study of the internal chronology of the 430 years from the call of Abraham to the Exodus is one of the more complex issues in biblical chronology. But then, so is the internal dating of the 480 years from the Exodus to the year Solomon started building the Temple. The dating of the Hebrew kings is also very complex, as is the dating of the post-exilic period. In dealing with biblical dating, it is a wise practice to tread slowly and carefully, and check the work of scholars who have spent years in study.

Exd 12:41

**“*to* the very *same* day.”** Exodus 12:41 seems to be saying that Abraham entered the land of Israel on the 15th of Nisan 430 years earlier. On that day, Israel started their journey out of Egypt. Actually leaving the national territory of Egypt took more time than just a day.

**“all the armies of Yahweh.”** The Jews are referred to as “armies” because of the way they were organized when they left. There also may be a bit of irony in the statement because this band of slaves, with God's help, becomes His army.

Exd 12:42

**“It is a night of keeping-watch to Yahweh.”** The night of the Passover meal, Yahweh watched over Israel so that they were protected from the angel of death. Now God wants Israel to keep the Passover and keep it as a night to obey and watch over Yahweh. Today many Orthodox Jews stay up until midnight in order to keep this ordinance.

Exd 12:43

**“no foreigner is to eat of it.”** In this context, the “foreigner” is someone who is not from Israel but happens to be in Israel but has no commitment to Yahweh or His laws. Over time the rabbis expanded the meaning of the word to include those people who they declared had apostatized from Israel and thus did not deserve to be called “Israelite” (or “Jew”), but that is just more of the entrance of demonic laws into the body of Jewish “laws” (actually, “traditions”) that were ungodly and a burden to people (cf. Matt. 15:9; Luke 11:46).

[For more information on who could eat the Passover, see commentary on Exod. 12:45.]

Exd 12:45

**“A sojourner.”** In this context, a “sojourner” is someone who is temporarily in Israel. For example, the person may be a merchant, or he may have come to Israel to escape his native country for some reason (like Naomi moved to Moab to escape a famine), and thus the person has no commitment to Yahweh or to the laws of Israel. The hired servant would be in the same position. They may have been hired from a foreign country or from a tribe or clan even within the territorial boundaries of Israel but they had no commitment to Yahweh or His laws. Similarly, a person who was a “foreigner,” a non-Israelite who happened to be in Israel, could not eat the Passover (Exod. 12:43).

If a person was part of the Israelite society by choice, like a slave who had agreed to be circumcised (Exod. 12:44) or like Rahab the prostitute who recognized Yahweh and married an Israelite man, or apparently like Uriah the Hittite who was one of David’s mighty men, they could eat the Passover (Num. 9:14).

So, the sojourner, the hired servant, and the foreigner could not eat the Passover, but the resident alien or circumcised slave who recognized Yahweh and wanted to live in Israel could eat the Passover.

Exd 12:46

**“It is to be eaten in one house.”** The Passover lamb was not to divided into pieces but kept as a whole lamb. If a family was so small it could not eat the entire lamb or afford to buy a lamb, and they shared it with another family (Exod. 12:4), then the two families would decide whose house was going to be the place where the Passover was to be eaten. The lamb was not to be cut in half with each family getting to eat a half in their own home. This is part of the typology of the Passover. Jesus, the “lamb of god,” suffered and died in one place as one whole individual. He was not cut apart.

**“you are not to break any of its bones.”** This is stated in the context of not dividing the lamb into parts, which would usually involve breaking a bone.

Exd 12:48

**“sojourner.”** The Hebrew word translated as “sojourner” is *toshav* (#08453, spelled תּוֹשָׁב or תֹּשָׁב), and it has a range of meanings but generally refers to a temporary resident or a resident alien (see commentary on Gen. 23:4).

Exd 12:51

**“And the very *same* day.”** See commentary on Exodus 12:41.

**Exodus Chapter 13**

Exd 13:2

**“Whatever opens the womb among the children of Israel, both of man and of animal, it is mine.”** God had claimed the firstborn of Israel from the time of the Exodus from Egypt (Exod. 13:2, 12, 13; 13:15; 22:29-30; Num. 18:15). But in Exodus 13:13; 22:29; and 34:19-20, God clarifies the command of Exodus 13:2 and says it applies to just the firstborn males, not the females.

The rabbis point out that the phrase “opens the womb” is important. When it comes to the firstborn male belonging to God, that is only the case if the firstborn child, the child that “opens the womb,” is a male. Baby girls were not given to God, so if a baby girl was the firstborn and thus the one to “open the womb,” then if the woman later had a baby boy it did not “open the womb” and thus was not given to Yahweh. The phrase “open the womb” is repeated six times in the Law so the point is clearly made (cf. Exod. 12:2, 12; 13:15; 34:19; Num. 8:16; 18:15). The rabbis are so strict about the phrase “opens the womb” that in modern Judaism, if the firstborn son is born by caesarian section, then the baby boy is not given to God and then redeemed because he did not technically “open the womb.”

The firstborn males that opened the womb, both of men and animals, belonged to Yahweh, but the unclean animals and the humans had to be redeemed, i.e., bought back from Yahweh (Num. 18:15)

However, God changed the command about the firstborn males being given to the service of God and decided to take the Levites instead of all the firstborn males (Num. 8:13-19. esp. v. 16 and 18). In spite of that, however, the people still had to give their firstborn male animals to God, and sacrifice them if they were clean animals and redeem them if they were unclean, and they still had to redeem their firstborn son if he opened the womb. Joseph and Mary did that with Jesus (Luke 2:21-24).

Exd 13:3

**“by a strong hand.”** The Hebrew text is literally, “by strength of hand,” which refers to God’s mighty power or a show of strength.

**“No leavened *bread* is to be eaten.”** This is the figure of speech ellipsis. The word “bread” or “food” is not in the text, which places an emphasis on “leavened.” The Israelites were not to eat anything that had been leavened.

Exd 13:4

**“the month Abib.”** Abib is also and more frequently called Nisan, and it is the first month of the year. It usually falls in the month of April.

Exd 13:5

**“that he swore to your fathers to give you.”** God promised the land to the “fathers” of Israel; Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. God repeated the promise that He would give the land of Israel to Abraham and his descendants many times, and said it in slightly different ways. He told Abraham that he and his descendants would get the land (Gen. 12:7; 13:15-17; 15:7, 18; 17:8). He told it to Isaac (Gen. 26:3). He told it to Jacob (Gen. 28:13; 35:12; 48:4). Then over and over He told Israel about the promise or that He would give them the land (cf. Exod. 6:4, 8; 12:25; 13:5, 11; Lev. 14:34; 20:24; 23:10; 25:2).

Exd 13:12

**“all that opens the womb.”** The other verses on the subject show that this refers to firstborn boys, not girls (cf. Exod. 13:13).

**“And every firstling.”** The Hebrew word translated as “firstling” is related to the Hebrew word for “cast” or “drop,” like the animal “drops” the firstling from the womb.

Exd 13:13

**“But every firstling.”** This command in Exodus 13:13 about donkeys and firstborn male children is repeated in Exodus 34:20.

**“firstling...firstborn.”** The Hebrew text uses two different words. The “firstling” is *pitrah* (#06363 פִּטְרָה), and the “firstborn” is *bekhor* (#01060 בְּכוֹר). The “firstborn” (*bekhor*) generally refers to the firstborn of humans, however, when humans and animals are included together, then *bekhor* is generally used as well.

**“firstling of a donkey you are to redeem with a lamb, but if you will not redeem it.”**

**“then you must break its neck.”** In the case where livestock was redeemed, the priest got a lamb and then got to eat part of it. If the man would not redeem his donkey, then he had to break its neck to kill it. Although not expressly stated in the text, the idea seems to be that if the priest did not get any profit from the birth of the donkey, then the owner could not get any use from it either. The rabbis teach that the donkey had to be killed by a blow to the neck, not by cutting the throat, because death from cutting the throat was reserved for animals that were then used as sacrificial animals.

**“And every firstborn male among your sons you must redeem.”** It seems to be generally understood by the scholars that Exodus 13:12-13 go together, and that to be a true “firstborn” son, the son had to be the very first child born to the mother. According to Exodus 13:12 and 13:15, the “firstborn” opened the womb. So, if the mother’s first baby was a boy, then it had to be redeemed with money. But if the firstborn child was a girl, then the first boy she gave birth to was not actually the “firstborn,” and the boy did not have to be redeemed by a payment of money.

The redemption of the firstborn son is a topic that is discussed in many different verses, and the different verses often give different details. In Exodus 13:12 and 13:15, the firstborn son had to “open the womb,” i.e., be the actual firstborn child. Modern Jews take the phrase “open the womb” to refer to a natural vaginal birth, and if the firstborn child is delivered by cesarean section, that child is not counted as having opened the womb, so no redemption ceremony is performed. In Exodus 13:13, 15; Exodus 34:20; Num. 8:16, the child had to be a male, a baby boy. According to Exodus 22:29, the child belonged to God, but Numbers 18:15 says the child must be redeemed, that is, bought back from God. However, according to Numbers 18:16, the child had to be redeemed. The redemption price was five shekels of silver, and the redemption was paid when the child was a month old. The provision that the child be a month old was due to the fact that if a baby lived for a month, then it had very good chances of living a lot longer. Many things could be wrong in the first month that would cause the death of the child, so if the baby died in that first month before the redemption money was paid, the child belonged to God and at death went back to God.

Apparently, the idea behind the firstborn son belonging to God and having to be redeemed was that the firstborn sons would serve in the Tabernacle/Temple. In Numbers 8:13-18, God decides to take the Levite males to serve Him instead of the firstborn sons of the people of Israel. Interestingly, the Jews continued to pay the redemption price for a firstborn son, and modern Orthodox Jews have a ceremony and redeem the child on its 31st day. Interestingly, although Jesus Christ was Mary’s firstborn son and the child who opened her womb, there is no mention of Joseph and her redeeming Jesus with five shekels of silver. That ritual is not mentioned in Luke, who moves past the one-month appointed time when the redemption price would have been paid, and skips forward to 40 days after Jesus was born and on to the offering of the two birds that were sacrificed in the Temple (Luke 2:22-24; Lev. 12:1-4). That Luke did not mention the redeeming of the baby leads us to wonder if the ritual was practiced by observant Jews at the time of Christ.

Exd 13:15

**“stubbornly refused.”** The Hebrew is *qashah* (#07185 קָשָׁה), see commentary on Exodus 4:21.

**“which is why I sacrifice to Yahweh every male that opens the womb.”** The context is animals. We learn from other places in the Law that the firstborn male clean animals were sacrificed to God, but the unclean animals had to be redeemed or the priest could sell them.

**“that opens the womb.”** This is an idiom for being the firstborn. The firstborn “opens the womb.”

**“but all the firstborn of my sons I redeem.”** The firstborn male children could not be offered as sacrifices, so they had to be redeemed—bought back from Yahweh with money. The redemption price is not given in Exodus, but is given in Numbers 18:15-16 as five shekels of silver. Here the active voice, “I redeem” is put for the command, i.e., “I command to be redeemed.”

Exd 13:16

**“symbols.”** The Hebrew word is rare and in later Hebrew was used to refer to the phylacteries (the little boxes attached to leather bands that some orthodox Jews wear on their foreheads and wrists). Some modern versions actually use the word “phylactery” (e.g., LSB, NASB), but they were unknown at the time of Moses. It is possible, however, that they had begun to be worn by some Jews by the time of Christ.

Exd 13:17

**“the road through the land of the Philistines.”** The road through the land of the Philistines was the major coastal road that ran along the Mediterranean Sea from Egypt, through Israel, and on to Damascus and points north. The Romans called it the *Via Maris*, “the Way of the Sea.” It is mentioned in Matthew 4:15 (see commentary on Matt. 4:15).

**“change their minds.”** The Hebrew word translated “change their minds” is *nacham* (#05162 נָחַם); see commentary on Jeremiah 18:8.

Exd 13:18

**“the road of the wilderness of the Red Sea.”** The Hebrew is difficult to translate because there are no prepositions between the nouns.

Exd 13:19

**“swear, yes, swear...visit, yes, visit.”** This is the figure of speech polyptoton (see commentary on Gen. 2:16).

**“God will visit, yes, visit you.”** Joseph had foretold that God would deliver Israel from slavery and directed the Israelites to carry his bones from Egypt to the Promised Land. (See Gen. 50:25 and commentaries on Gen. 50:24; Exod. 3:16).

Exd 13:20

**“on the edge of the wilderness.”** So the Israelites had reached the edge of inhabited Egypt.

**Exodus Chapter 14**

Exd 14:2

**“in front of.”** That is, in front of as they were approaching it.

**“Pi-hahiroth...Migdol...Baal-zephon.”** These are Semitic names not Egyptian names, which shows some of the Semitic influence in the border areas of Egypt.

Exd 14:3

**“They are *wandering in* confusion.”** The text does not tell us how Pharaoh knew where the Israelites were traveling, but when God told them to turn back so they could go more to the east instead of north up the Mediterranean coast, Pharaoh thought they were just confused and lost and would make easy prey.

Exd 14:4

**“I will harden Pharaoh’s heart.”** See commentary on Exodus 4:21.

**“the Egyptians will know that I am Yahweh.”** This is better understood as, “the Egyptians will experience that I am Yahweh” (see commentary on Exod. 6:7).

**“And they did so.”** This phrase refers back to Exodus 14:2. “speak to Israel, that they turn back.” Israel obeyed God and did what He said.

Exd 14:5

**“the hearts of Pharaoh and of his servants were changed.”** In the Semitic culture of the ancient Near East, the “heart” was thought to be the organ of mental activity; they did not know what the brain really did. So the way this verse would be understood in the ancient Israelite culture would be “Pharaoh and his officials changed their minds,” which is the way the NIV2011 reads.

**“What is this we have done.”** It is amazing that the Egyptians had forgotten so quickly the devastation that Yahweh had brought upon Egypt. This is like a national spiritual blindness. It is likely that the demons in Egypt blinded the minds of the people so that they forgot the pain that they had been in. Great national movements are very often spiritually generated.

**“released Israel from serving us?”** The word “serving” is the same word as is used in the phrase “serving” Yahweh. Israel had been serving the Egyptians, but God set them free to serve Him.

Exd 14:8

**“Yahweh hardened the heart of Pharaoh.”** See commentary on Exodus 4:21.

**“with a high hand.”** The scholars differ as to exactly what that idiom implies, and the translations vary (e.g., “confidently” (CEB); “boldly” (CJB); “defiantly” (CSB); “going out in triumph” (NAB)). The meaning likely combines the thoughts of a couple of these translations, and likely refers to some amount of confidence and some amount of defiance and a “good riddance” attitude.

Exd 14:9

**“*as they were* encamping.”** Israel was on the move and heading for the Promised Land, so they did not try to fully set up camp and settle down. By the time the Egyptians caught up with them, they were in the process of setting up camp for the night. God had told them to set up camp close to Pi-hahiroth (Exod. 14:2).

Exd 14:11

**“What is this that you have done to us.”** The Israelites were as blind as the Egyptians. The Egyptians were pursuing because they had forgotten how terrible the plagues had been, and now the Israelites had forgotten how powerful God is. These are examples of tremendous spiritual blindness caused by demon spirits, and it is one reason why the believers in a nation have to pray diligently for that nation.

Exd 14:12

**“than to die in the wilderness.”** It would be better to live in Egypt than die in the wilderness, but it would be much better to live as free people in Israel. The Israelites forgot how great and powerful God is.

Exd 14:14

**“and you—quiet down.”** The Israelites had been crying out in fear (Exod. 14:10), but Moses is instructing them to quiet down and be calm and trust God for deliverance. It is possible to translate this verse as more of a promise than an imperative, more like, Yahweh will fight for you and you will be quiet.

Exd 14:16

**“Lift up your staff and stretch out your hand.”** Doing God’s work on earth is a cooperative effort. We cannot just sit back and let God work; we have to participate.

Exd 14:17

**“I will harden the hearts of the Egyptians.”** See commentary on Exodus 4:21.

Exd 14:23

**“The Egyptians pursued *them*.”** This would have included Pharaoh, in contrast to the Ten Commandments movie by Cecil B. DeMille in which Pharaoh stays on the shore while his army dies. That the Pharaoh of the Exodus died in the Red Sea means that if we have an Egyptian sarcophagus with a mummy in it, then that mummy cannot be the Pharaoh of the Exodus.

Exd 14:24

**“during the morning watch.”** So this happened between 2 a.m. and 6 a.m. It is important to note that the text does not say “in the morning,” but rather “during the morning watch.” The way that the Hebrews counted time was “hours” during the day and “watches” during the night. The “night” was divided into three watches of about four hours each, and the Hebrew day began at sunset, so the three watches of the night started the new day, and when the watches were over the “hours” began. The first watch was 6 p.m. to 10 p.m. (even though it sometimes was not dark at 6 p.m.), the second watch was 10 p.m. to our 2 a.m., and the third watch, called “the morning watch” because it often ended about when the morning light came, was about 2:00 to 6:00 a.m. The Hebrew text literally reads, “the watch of the morning,” making it clear that this is referring to the “morning watch” and not just “the morning.” Although it was dark at this time, it was the fourteenth day of the month so there was a full moon that people could see by.

**“in the pillar of fire and of cloud.”** That the angel (sometimes called “Yahweh” by the custom of agency) was “in” the fire and cloud agrees with Exodus 13:21. The ESV and NRSV read similarly to the REV. Both read, “At the morning watch the LORD in the pillar of fire and cloud looked down upon the Egyptian army.”

**“army.”** Or, “camp.” The word is the same here as in Judges 4:15.

**“threw…into a panic.”** See commentary on Joshua 10:10.

Exd 14:25

**“bound.”** The Hebrew can be “turned,” “loosened,” or “bound,” depending on the root word. “Bound” fits the context and is the way the LXX, Syriac, and Samaritan Pentateuch read. A definition in *HALOT* is to turn or turn aside, in which case the Egyptians could not make the chariots go where they wanted them to.

**“with difficulty.”** This is the reading suggested in the *HALOT* and is reflected in English versions such as the ESV. If the verse reads “turned aside” instead of “bound,” the idea would seem to be that something happened to the chariots so that they were hard to drive and could not be properly steered.

**“I will flee.”** The Hebrew is literally, “I will flee,” indicating that the Egyptians are speaking with one voice. They all agree that they had better flee.

Exd 14:29

**“walked on dry ground.”** One of the miracles of the Red Sea crossing was that when God drove the waters back with a strong wind, He also dried up the bottom of the sea so crossing it was easy. God did the same thing for Israel when they crossed the Jordan River into the Promised Land (Josh. 3:17).

Exd 14:30

**“and Israel saw the Egyptians dead on the seashore.”** There is something very final about seeing the dead body of an enemy. It gives closure to the situation. When the Israelites saw the dead bodies of the Egyptians, then they knew the danger was over. They could feel safe and they had closure. There are a number of times in Scripture when people see the dead bodies of the enemy (e.g. Exod. 14:30; Isa. 37:36; 66:24).

Exd 14:31

**“and the people feared Yahweh and put their trust in Yahweh and in his servant Moses.”** The people’s trust in Yahweh and Moses did not last very long. That the Israelites vacillated so often and so quickly between belief and unbelief is a characteristic of the fallen nature of people.

**Exodus Chapter 15**

Exd 15:1

**“triumphed, yes triumphed.”** In the Hebrew text, the verb translated as “triumphed” is repeated twice for emphasis, the first being an infinitive verb and the second an imperfect verb. This is the figure of speech polyptoton (see commentary on Gen. 2:16).

**“he has thrown into the sea.”** Yahweh’s victory over Egypt is celebrated, and the Bible uses three different Hebrew words for God throwing the Egyptians into the sea (cf. Exod. 14:27; 15:1, 4). The reason for the repetition and emphasis has to do with the incredible victory of Yahweh over His enemies. It was humanly impossible for the Israelites to protect themselves against the mighty Egyptian army, but God stepped in and defeated, soundly defeated, the undefeatable foe. This kind of event was replayed in Israel’s conquest of the Promised Land, and in Israel’s wars against her enemies, and it will be gloriously replayed in the Final Battle when God defeats Satan and his demons and casts them into the Lake of Fire (Rev. 20:9-10).

Exd 15:3

**“Yahweh is a man of war.”** The simple understanding of Exodus 15:3 is that Yahweh has enemies that have to be dealt with, and the Bible has many battles and wars, major and minor, that Yahweh engages in. This simple verse contradicts the understanding of many theologians who say that everything that happens is God’s will. Yahweh has to be a warrior because everything that happens is not His will. God gave humans free will, the ability to decide whether to obey God or not, and when people decide not to obey God, then God has to deal with that. That people can decide not to obey God is why there is evil in the world.

**“man.”** The Hebrew word translated as “man” is *ish*, and in this context, it is a reference to the character of the person. The verse is not using *ish* ontologically, that is, saying that Yahweh is a “man.” It is saying that Yahweh is an “individual” who has the character of a warrior.

[For more on the battle between Good and Evil, see commentary on Luke 4:6.]

Exd 15:4

**“his chosen officers.”** In this context, Pharoah’s “chosen officers” are his elite commanders, his most capable officers. The most knowledgeable, capable, and best-equipped humans are no match for Yahweh; the elite officers joined the fight against Him and ended up dead.

**“sunk in the Red Sea.”** This is graphic and no doubt accurate. The chosen officers would generally have been dressed in better armor than the average Egyptian soldier, and they would have sunk in the sea under the weight of the armor they were wearing.

Exd 15:6

**“your right hand, Yahweh, smashed the enemy.”** When the Israelites were obeying God, God fought with them and smashed the enemy, as we see here in Exodus 15:6. But when Israel sinned, the enemy “smashed” Israel (Judg. 10:8). Disobedience to God opens the door for the Devil to afflict people.

Exd 15:7

**“you overthrow those who rise up against you.”** This is a universal truth, although sometimes it does not happen quickly or in this life. Nevertheless, eventually all of God’s enemies will be overthrown.

**“stubble.”** This is the same word as “stubble” in Exodus 5:12. The Israelites worked hard for the Egyptians, gathering stubble to build with; now the Egyptians are like stubble to the Israelites.

Exd 15:8

**“By the wind from your nostrils.”** Occasionally the Hebrew word “nostrils” is used for “anger” due to the fact that when a person gets angry their nostrils often flare open. That, combined with the fact that God’s “nostrils” is an anthropomorphic expression, explains why some English translations read “anger” instead of “nostrils,” e.g., “with the blast of thy anger the waters were gathered” (Douay-Rheims, cf. LSV, REB, YLT).

Exd 15:9

**“desire.”** The Hebrew is the word nephesh, for “soul,” here put for what the soul wants.

**“take possession of them.”** Although almost all the English versions have “destroy” or an equivalent word, the Hebrew text has the word *yarash* (sometimes spelled *yaresh*; #03423 יָרַשׁ), which almost always means “take possession of” (especially by force), “dispossess,” or “inherit.” George Bush gives the possible translation, “‘my hand shall repossess them;’ i.e., take them back to slavery.”[[26]](#footnote-24825)

Although Pharaoh was very angry with Israel, there is no indication that he wanted to kill them all. After the death of the firstborn males in Egypt, Pharaoh told the Israelites, “Get up; get out” (Exod. 12:31). But then Pharaoh and his leaders repented that they had let Israel go because the Israelites were their slaves. They said, “What is this we have done, that we have released Israel from serving us?” (Exod. 14:5). They were upset they had let their slaves go and they wanted them back. There are several good Hebrew words that mean “kill” or “destroy,” but *yarash* is not one of them. While it is likely that in recapturing the Israelites, the Egyptians would have killed a lot of the fully grown men, they would not likely have killed the women and children.

Exd 15:12

**“the earth swallowed them.”** Here the word “earth” is not used of the land, but rather is used of the “earth” in the sense of the land and sea.

Exd 15:13

**“You have guided them.”** This is a prophetic perfect for “you will guide them.” This is Moses and the people of Israel expressing their confidence that God will bring them into the Promised Land and dispossess the Canaanites there.

Exd 15:14

**“The peoples.”** This refers to the Canaanites and other “ites.”

**“has taken hold of.”** Possibly a prophetic perfect (see [NET text note](https://classic.net.bible.org/verse.php?book=Exo&chapter=15&verse=14&tab=commentaries)).

**“of the inhabitants of Philistia.”** If the Israelites decided to turn west and go into the Promised Land by the western route, then Philistia would be one of the first areas attacked by Israel.

Exd 15:15

**“Edom...Moab...Canaan.”** If Israel took the eastern route to go into Canaan from Egypt, which they did, then Edom, Moab, and Canaan would be encountered in that order, and they were. Edom (Num. 20), Moab (Num. 21).

**“were dismayed...took hold...have melted.”** The verbs are prophetic perfects, projecting something that will happen as if it had already happened. The CSB translates the idiom out of the text and catches the meaning: “Then the chiefs of Edom will be terrified; trembling will seize the leaders of Moab; all the inhabitants of Canaan will panic.”

[For more on the prophetic perfect idiom, see commentary on Eph. 2:6.]

**“mighty men.”** The Hebrew word translated by the phrase “mighty men” is literally “rams,” the powerful male leaders of the flock. “Trembling takes hold of the rams of Moab.” The same figure is used in the Masoretic text of 2 Kings 24:15 and Ezekiel 17:13.

Exd 15:16

**“they are as still as a stone.”** The inhabitants of the land do not martial their forces and attack. However, the Israelites attacked countries in the Transjordan.

**“passed by.”** This could refer to passing over the Jordan River or it could be that they passed by other nations on their way to the Promised Land.

**“you have created.”** “Created” is a meaning of the verb here, and it also fits with Deut. 32:6. God created the nation of Israel out of a bunch of separate but related tribes. Although many versions use “purchased” or “acquired,” in this context “created” seems to be a much better historical fit. Also, it fits with God creating Israel for His purpose of bringing forth the Messiah from Israel.

Exd 15:17

**“on the mountain of your inheritance.”** In this case, the “mountain” of God’s inheritance is not a single mountain, but a hilly country, Israel. God Himself will have His temple on Mount Zion, but the people will inhabit the country. We get the same basic idea when central Israel is called “Mount Ephraim” or when the whole range of Hermon is called “Mount Hermon.” “Mount Hermon” is a range of mountains that runs for over 40 miles (70 km).

Exd 15:21

**“triumphed, yes triumphed.”** Exodus 15:21 repeats some of what Moses said in Exodus 15:1.

Exd 15:22

**“they went out into the wilderness of Shur.”** The wilderness of Shur was beyond the traditional boundary markers of Egypt, so in going there they did what they had asked Pharoah for, which was to go three days into the wilderness (e.g. Exod. 5:3; 8:27).

**“And they went three days in the wilderness.”** The fact that the people went three days without water and then ended up in a very difficult situation and murmured against Moses and Aaron is the origin of the modern rabbinic teaching that a person must not go three days without hearing the Torah. So there is torah reading in synagogues on the Sabbath (Saturday), Monday, and Thursday.

Exd 15:25

**“directed him.”** This is more literal than “showed,” which is what many English versions have.

**“tree.”** The Hebrew word is generic and can mean “tree, wood, log, stick, or plank.” In this case, it seems to make sense that God showed Moses a tree that could heal the water and Moses threw part of the tree into the water and it became drinkable.

**“sweet.”** This is an idiom meaning good to drink, not sweet as if sugar was added to it. This is a miracle. There is no wood that a person can throw into such a large volume of bitter water that will turn the bitter water sweet to drink so that all Israel can drink it. God healed the water.

**“Yahweh made a statute.”** The Hebrew text literally reads “he,” not “Yahweh,” but the REV and some other English versions add “Yahweh” for clarity.

Exd 15:26

**“listen, yes, listen.”** This is the figure of speech polyptoton (see commentary on Gen. 2:16).

**Exodus Chapter 16**

Exd 16:1

**“the wilderness of Sin.”** The location of the wilderness of Sin is not known for sure, but scholars believe that it is south of the midpoint of the western side of the Sinai Peninsula.

**“the fifteenth day of the second month.”** The Israelites left Egypt on the fifteenth day of Nisan (Exod. 12:12), which was the first month of the year (Exod. 12:2), so by the fifteenth day of the second month they had been traveling one month. The Israelite months were lunar months and thus were 29 or 30 days depending on the sighting of the new crescent moon, which event started a new month.

Exd 16:2

**“And the whole congregation of the children of Israel murmured against Moses and against Aaron.”** It would have taken a few days or weeks to rile up the whole congregation of Israel, so this murmuring could well have been a little after the Israelites arrived in the wilderness of Sin. Or, if the murmuring started while they were traveling that first month, the murmuring could have come to a crescendo when they camped in that wilderness.

Exd 16:3

**“when we sat by the flesh pots, when we ate bread until we were full!”** This is not the way other verses describe the slavery in Egypt, which was bitter slavery (e.g., Exod. 1:14, which describes Israel’s plight even before Moses, and Exod. 6:9). This murmuring would have started with a few people and spread through the congregation. The people who started it are called a “root of bitterness” (Heb. 12:15), and leaders are to watch out for them. The Bible does not tell us who started the murmuring, but some people are just bitter about everything, some people would have had higher positions in Egypt and were likely bitter about losing those elevated positions, and some people may have been afflicted by lying spirits (demons) and were like the false prophets in Israel who could simply not see the truth of the situation. In any case, the assembly of Israel became infected with bitterness and delusion.

It is quite possible that Korah and his company started this murmuring, but even if he didn’t, he started the next round of it, and here in Exodus 16:3 the accusation against Moses is very similar to the accusation of Korah and his company that is recorded in Numbers 16 (Num. 16:1-3, 13). At that time, God took His own advice and removed Korah and the men with him from the congregation (Num. 16:28-33).

**“For you have brought us out.”** The Israelites had to be thoroughly deluded by this time in order for them to ignore all the great works and power of Yahweh and suddenly believe that “you” (Moses) brought the people out of Egypt. Moses did not manufacture the plagues on Egypt and in fact, it was Yahweh who told him what the plagues were going to be.

Exd 16:4

**“I will rain bread from heaven for you.”** This is idiomatic. The manna did not literally come down like rain, it appeared on the ground after the layer of dew evaporated (Exod. 16:14). This concept and idiom is used in several places in the Bible. For example, when Malachi says that if the Israelites will tithe then God will open the windows of heaven and pour out a blessing, the blessing does not literally come down like rain, it appears in the lives of those who are blessed in many different ways (Mal. 3:10).

**“bread.”** Although the Hebrew word most literally means “bread” it can also refer more generally to “food,” and some English versions read that way (GW, NLT). The manna was not literally “bread,” but it was food.

**“follow my instructions.”** The Hebrew text is more literally, “walk in my Torah,” but “walk in” in this context is idiomatic for “live according to,” or “follow.” Also, “Torah” means “instruction,” not literally “law,” and although “Torah” is singular in the Hebrew, here it is a collective singular and refers to not just one single “instruction,” but instructions in general.

Exd 16:5

**“And on the sixth day, they are to prepare what they bring in.”** On the sixth day of the week, the people had to prepare the food they would eat on both the sixth and seventh day because the seventh day was the Sabbath and there was no work allowed (Exod. 20:8-11).

Exd 16:6

**“*In the* evening you will know.”** The Hebrew text is quite short and punchy: “Evening you will know,” and in Exodus 16:7, “and morning you will see.” If we read the text as one sentence, as it is in Hebrew, it is punchy and impacting: “Evening you will know...and morning you will see.” The Israelites experienced the presence of Yahweh every morning and evening, because during the day there was a pillar of cloud before them, and at night it turned into a pillar of fire. But this evening was special because Yahweh brought quails for the Israelites to eat (Exod. 16:13). The next morning was also special because the manna appeared for the first time and then would appear 6 days a week for the next 40 years and sustain the Israelites, and furthermore, the brilliant glory of God appeared in the pillar of cloud (Exod. 16:10).

Exd 16:7

**“and *in the* morning, you will see the glory of Yahweh.”** The Hebrew text is punchy and short: “and morning you will see” (see commentary on Exod. 16:6). The Israelites did see the glory of Yahweh that next morning when God revealed His presence among them, appearing in His cloud of glory inside the pillar of cloud (Exod. 16:10).

**“the glory of Yahweh.”** The “glory” of Yahweh was the bright cloud, sometimes called the “shekinah” or “shekinah glory” that surrounded God and veiled His presence so that people could not see Him directly. That brilliant cloud of light that surrounded God and, for example, filled Moses’ Tent and Solomon’s Temple, was so bright that the priests could not minister there (Exod. 40:34-35; 1 Kings 8:10-11; 2 Chron. 5:13-14; 7:1-3). Thus, when “the glory of Yahweh appeared in the cloud” (Exod. 16:10), that is, the cloud that was traveling ahead of the Israelites, the cloud shone with extraordinary brilliance, and the people knew that Yahweh Himself was present in their midst in the cloud (see commentary on Exod. 16:10).

The “glory of Yahweh,” God’s manifest presence, appeared in the cloud to support and protect Moses and the leaders with him. In spite of all the evidence that God was leading, guiding, and protecting Israel, the people still murmured against Moses. The cloud of God’s glorious presence showed irrefutably that Moses was not in charge, God was, and murmuring against Moses was murmuring against God.

[For more information about the “glory of Yahweh” and the bright cloud that surrounds God, see commentary on Ezek. 1:28.]

**“because he hears your murmurings against Yahweh.”** When people murmur against the leaders that God has set in place, they murmur against God Himself. While not every “leader” is appointed by God—there certainly are many evil and ungodly leaders—murmuring against God’s leaders is murmuring against God.

Exd 16:8

**“flesh to eat in the evening and in the morning bread to the full.”** The flesh (meat) in the evening was the quail, and the bread, or “food” in the morning was the manna (Exod. 16:13-15).

Exd 16:9

**“Come near before Yahweh.”** The people could not come near Yahweh at the Tabernacle because it had not been set up yet (Exod. 40:2, 17, 33). Exodus 16:1 lets us know that the Israelites had been traveling for a month and then came to the wilderness of Sin. The people may have already been able to go to a special tent that Moses had set up by then (see commentary on Exod. 33:7), but before Moses set up that early tent it seems the people likely went near the pillar of cloud where they saw the presence of Yahweh (Exod. 16:10).

Exd 16:10

**“they looked toward the wilderness.”** They looked forward toward the wilderness where the pillar was leading them, that would have been to the northeast. They did not look back toward Egypt.

**“the glory of Yahweh appeared in the cloud.”** The “glory” of Yahweh was the bright cloud that surrounded God and veiled His presence so that people could not see Him directly (see commentary on Ezek. 1:4 and 1:28). Thus, when “the glory of Yahweh appeared in the cloud” (Exod. 16:10), the cloud shone with extraordinary brilliance and the people knew that Yahweh Himself was present in their midst in the cloud. Moses had told the Israelites they would see the glory of Yahweh (Exod. 16:7), and now they were seeing it. Of the glory of Yahweh in the cloud, Nahum Sarna writes: “that is, the luminous cloud that symbolizes God's active, dynamic, indwelling Presence in Israel during the wilderness period,” and Sarna translates the latter part of the verse: “and there, in the cloud, appeared the Presence of the LORD.”[[27]](#footnote-11116)

Exd 16:12

**“In the evening.”** The Hebrew text literally reads, “between the evenings,” which is when the Passover lamb was sacrificed (Exod. 12:6). In the biblical culture, “evening” was used in two different ways: from about 3 p.m. when the sun was beginning to noticeably go down til about 6 p.m., and then from about 6 p.m. until darkness (see commentary on Exod. 12:6).

**“you will eat flesh...filled with bread.”** Moses had already told the Israelites this once (Exod. 16:6-7) but now that they are assembled, Yahweh tells him to tell the Israelites that again.

**“And you will know that I am Yahweh.”** You will experience that I am Yahweh (see commentary on Exod. 6:7).

Exd 16:14

**“surface.”** The Hebrew word is more literally “face.”

Exd 16:15

**“What.”** The Hebrew word for “what” is *man* (#04478 מָן), and the Hebrew phrase, *man hu*, is literally, “what it?” or as we would normally say in English, “What is it?” or “What is that.” The Israelites called it “*man*,” literally, “What.” The name “*manna*” comes from the Greek, not the Hebrew. It is not clear why English Bibles changed from the Hebrew word *man* to the Greek word *manna*. John Wycliffe’s Bible, translated in the late 1300s, reads “*man*.” William Tyndale’s Pentateuch, done in 1530, also reads “*man*.” The Geneva Bible, done in 1599, also reads “*man*.” However, the King James Version of 1611 reads “manna.” It seems likely that the translators used the Greek word *manna* because calling it “man” might be confusing to some English readers who might think there was some kind of connection between the *man* that was bread from heaven and human man, *adam* (#0120 אָדָם) who was created from the earth in Genesis. The Israelites named the manna “What?” because they did not know what it was (Exod. 16:31).

**“bread.”** Here the word “bread” is used more generally of “food.”

Exd 16:16

**“An omer for each person; according to the number of your people.”** The Hebrew word translated as “head” is more literally “skull,” and refers to a person. Each person was to get an omer to eat. A number of English versions make the verse easier to read by leaving out the “head” or “skull.” For example, the NRSV reads, “an omer to a person according to the number of persons,” but the word “person” is not repeated twice. There is a “skull count,” and each skull (person) gets an omer of manna.

**“omer.”** The NET text note reads, “The omer is an amount mentioned only in this chapter, and its size is unknown, except by comparison with the ephah (Exod. 16:36). A number of recent English versions approximate the omer as “two quarts” (cf. NCV, CEV, NLT); TEV ‘two litres.’” However, the text note in the 2020 NASB says three quarts.

Exd 16:17

**“and some gathered more, some less.”** God had estimated an omer for each person, but some gathered more than an omer and some people gathered less.

Exd 16:19

**“No one is to leave any of it until the morning.”** The manna would spoil overnight, and since people could gather it every day, there was no need to try to save any of it for the next day—except before the Sabbath, when they were instructed to gather enough for two days. God reinforced the idea that people were to work for the food they ate. The Israelites had to gather it every day if they wanted to eat every day.

Exd 16:20

**“some of them left some of it until the morning.”** We can understand the natural tendency to want to have plenty to eat, especially after being in Egypt and then in the wilderness, but God had spoken and so now was the time to trust and obey God.

Exd 16:21

**“and when the sun grew hot, it melted.”** The manna was free for the taking, but it did not encourage laziness because it melted when the sun got hot, which occurred quite early in the morning. People needed to get up and get to work gathering it if they wanted food for the day.

Exd 16:23

**“a holy Sabbath.”** This is the first time in the Bible that the word “Sabbath” is used, and so God has to describe it as a “day of rest.” Although the REV capitalizes “Sabbath,” it is possible that the better choice would be to simply have “sabbath” in this verse because the formal weekly “Sabbath” was just being put in place. This is the first time a regular weekly rest was mentioned, then in the Ten Commandments, “the Sabbath” became clarified and set forth as part of the Old Covenant and Mosaic Law.

[For more on the Sabbath, see commentary on Exod. 20:10.]

Exd 16:29

**“Yahweh has given you the Sabbath.”** The Sabbath was a gift to humankind. Especially in the ancient world when daily life required so much hard work, having a day to rest was a wonderful gift indeed!

Exd 16:31

**“manna.”** Scholars have sought for years to find a naturally occurring substance that could be the manna, and have suggested all kinds of things from tree sap to something from insects. The fact that it appeared and the Israelites did not know what it was, and then it disappeared forty years later never to be seen again, should tell us it was a unique creation of God to feed His people. We will not find it in nature.

**“wafers.”** This is the only occurrence of this Hebrew word. The manna tasted like something mixed with, or cooked in, honey. So the manna was good tasting and not bitter or hard to get used to. God made a food that everyone would like.

Exd 16:32

**“Let a full omer of it be kept throughout your generations.”** This is another miracle associated with manna. Regularly it could not be kept even overnight without breeding worms and stinking. But on the Sabbath it lasted two days. But here, one special omer of manna is to last for generations. However, we know that the manna did not last, it disappeared without a trace. By the time of Solomon there was nothing in the ark but the two tablets with the Ten Commandments on them (1 Kings 8:9). Knowing the curiosity and disobedience of the Israelites, it is likely that in the generations after the Israelites crossed into Canaan many Israelites wanted to “have just a small taste” of the manna, and in the almost four centuries between Moses and Solomon the manna was eaten up.

Exd 16:34

**“so Aaron placed it before the Testimony.”** Exodus 16:34-35 had to have been written after Moses died. The jar of manna was in the ark (Heb. 9:4).

Exd 16:35

**“until they came to a settled land.”** Exodus 16:35 had to have been written after Moses died, because when Moses died, Israel was still east of the Jordan River and the manna had not stopped yet. The “settled land” was land that was appropriate to settle in and raise all kinds of trees and crops. Israel had been in the “wilderness” (or “desert”) for 40 years, and most of the native people who lived there were shepherds and nomads. Moses would not have experienced the manna stopping.

Exd 16:36

**“omer.”** The omer is mentioned only here in Exodus 16:36, and it is a different measure from the “homer,” which is mentioned in Ezek. 45:11-15. Saying the omer is one-tenth of an ephah is not as helpful as it might seem, because the ephah is a dry measure of an unknown amount, and the estimates of how much it was vary tremendously. So, since we do not know how much the ephah was, we do not know how much the omer was.

However, we do know that an omer of manna was enough to feed someone for a day (Exod. 16:16, 18, 22). An ephah of barley would then be able to feed a person for about ten days. So if an omer could feed a grown man for a day, it could have been around 2 quarts of manna, which would make an ephah around 2 ½ gallons.

**Exodus Chapter 17**

Exd 17:1

**“in stages.”** The journey from the Wilderness of Sin to Rephidim was not a one-day journey, but took many days and was done in stages; traveling and camping then traveling and camping.

**“there was no water for the people to drink.”** The Bible does not say why there was no water there. It is possible that because they were in the territory of the Amalekites, the Amalekites had plugged up or disguised any wells that were there.

Exd 17:6

**“I will stand in front of you there on the rock in Horeb.”** This is likely one of the occurrences of God appearing in human form to His people (see commentary on Acts 7:55). It is possible, but not stated anywhere, that God appeared in the person of an agent of His, which would have been an angel, just like it was an angel that called to Moses out of the burning bush (see commentary on Exod. 3:4). Evidence that it was not an angel is that it was later in Israel’s journeys that God said He would send an angel to go before the Israelites and guide them (Exod. 23:20; 32:34). Whether what appeared to Moses was God or angel, he was invisible to the people who were with Moses. All they saw was the water coming out of the rock.

**“in the sight.”** Literally, “before the eyes” of the elders of Israel. Moses did this miracle while the elders of Israel watched. That did not keep them from distrusting him and turning against him later.

Exd 17:7

**“Is Yahweh among us, or not?”** This sentiment, “Is Yahweh among us, or not,” is very human. It is far too typical that as long as things are going well, people believe in God and think God is blessing them. But as soon as things get tough in life—sometimes very tough—people doubt God’s love or even God’s existence. In most instances, it is because people have no idea what God will or will not do, or can or cannot control, that gets people doubting God. For example, people believe “God is in control” in a micromanaging sense. But a good look at the world around us shows us that the world is much more like the Devil than God, and sure enough, 1 John 5:19 says the Devil holds sway over the world and Hebrews 2:14 says the Devil holds the power of death. People need to base their theology on what the Bible says about God, not what tradition says about Him.

[For more on the Devil being responsible for much of what happens on earth, see commentary on Luke 4:6.]

Exd 17:9

**“Joshua.”** This is the first time Joshua is mentioned in the Bible. There is no introduction or explanation, Joshua simply appears on the scene.

Exd 17:12

**“steady.”** The Hebrew is more literally “faithful,” but in this context it means “steady.”

Exd 17:13

**“the mouth of the sword.”** Used to show great destruction, as if the sword was eating its victims (see commentary on Josh. 6:21).

Exd 17:14

**“blot, yes, blot.”** This is the figure of speech polyptoton (see Gen. 2:16).

Exd 17:15

**“Yahweh is My Banner.”** The Hebrew word translated as “banner” can be “sign” or “evidence” or “reminder.” (cf. Sarna).

Exd 17:16

Lit. “Hand upon the throne (or “chair”) of Yah.”[[28]](#footnote-17847)

**Exodus Chapter 18**

Exd 18:1

**“Jethro.”** “Jethro” is the priestly name of Reuel, the father-in-law of Moses (see commentary on Judg. 4:11).

Exd 18:3

**“Gershom.”** The name means something like, “sojourner there.”

Exd 18:4

**“Eliezer.”** There is almost nothing about him in the Bible. We don’t even know when in the life of Moses he was born.

Exd 18:5

**“the Mountain of God.”** Mount Sinai was called “the Mountain of God” because that is where Israel camped and where God met Israel and made a covenant with them that we today often refer to as “the Old Covenant” (Exod. 24:1-8, esp. v. 8).

Exd 18:7

**“bowed down.”** The common biblical way of bowing down before people or God was to fall to one’s knees and bow the upper body to the earth. It is the same Hebrew word as “worship.”

[For more on bowing down, see Word Study: “Worship.”]

**“Each of them asked about the other’s welfare.”** “Greeting” people you met on the road was a standard practice and custom in the ancient Near East and these greetings could be long and involved. That custom explains why Elisha told his servant Gehazi not to greet anyone on the road (2 Kings 4:29) and why, when Jesus sent out the 72 disciples, he told them not to greet anyone on the road (Luke 10:4).

Exd 18:11

**“than all gods, because of the issue in which they acted.”** When the text says, “because of the issue in which ‘they’ acted insolently,” the “they” refers back to the “gods,” who were influencing the Egyptians who followed their guidance. There was a war going on in the spiritual world between the gods of Egypt and Yahweh (Exod. 12:12). The “gods” of Egypt, which were manifestations of the Devil and his demons, and who were represented on earth by the ungodly Egyptian leaders, fought against Yahweh, represented by Moses, Aaron, and the Israelites. Jethro may have had the Egyptians in his mind when he said “they acted,” but God knew the real truth, which appears in the Bible. The ones “acting insolently” were the gods of Egypt, who were guiding the Egyptians. The order and the substance of the plagues were overt attacks on the gods of Egypt (see commentary on Exod. 10:1).

**“against Israel.”** The Hebrew text is literally “against them,” but the “them” refers to Israel. The word “Israel” is supplied for clarity.

Exd 18:12

**“brought a burnt offering and sacrifices for God.”** In this context, “God” is Yahweh, whom Jethro had just spoken of in the previous verses (e.g., Exod. 18:10-11). The Mosaic Law with its specifics about sacrifices had not been given yet, and so Jethro would have relied upon ancient custom when he offered sacrifices.

Exd 18:15

**“Because the people come to me to inquire of God.”** Here in this context in Exodus 18:15-16, Moses stands between the people and God, and represents God’s voice to the people. But just a few verses later, in Exodus 18:19, Moses represents the people to God and brings their issues to God. Thus, we see that Moses acted as the mediator between God and people, and represented both sides. In that, Moses was a type of Christ, who today is the mediator between God and people (1 Tim. 2:5).

Exd 18:16

**“and his laws.”** The Hebrew word translated as “laws” is *torah*, and in this context, it might well have a broader meaning than just “laws”; it likely means “instruction” as well.

Exd 18:17

**“This thing.”** The Hebrew is literally, “the thing.” Some English versions read “What you are doing,” which also catches the sense of the statement.

Exd 18:18

**“worn out, yes, worn out.”** This is the figure of speech polyptoton (see commentary on Gen. 2:16).

**“this people.”** The Hebrew is singular and saying “this people” rather than “these people” magnifies the singularity of the group.

**“You will not be able.”** The Hebrew verb is in the imperfect aspect which often expresses a future action. In this case, the future tense agrees with the first part of the verse, “you will become.”

Exd 18:21

**“hating unjust gain.”** The most common “unjust gain” attained by leaders was bribes. The ESV even translates the phrase as “hate a bribe.”

Exd 18:23

**“If you will do this thing.”** That is, if Moses will delegate the responsibility of judging to others. Many leaders have a very difficult time letting go of power and delegating to others.

**“this people also will go to their place in peace.”** If people’s complaints and issues were settled in a godly fashion to their satisfaction, they would go back to their tents in peace and the issue would be over with.

Exd 18:26

**“They brought the hard issues to Moses.”** In Exodus 18:22, the issues were called “major” and “minor.” Here in Exodus 18:26, we see the “major” issues are the “hard” issues, and the minor issues are still referred to as minor issues.

Exd 18:27

**“Moses let his father-in-law depart.”** The Hebrew is more literally that “Moses sent his father-in-law away” (LSV, YLT, cf. NET), but that translation reads too harsh in English. However, an alternative translation that appears in the REV and other English versions is that “Moses let his father-in-law depart” (ESV, Geneva, KJV, cf. CJB, CSB, NRSV, RSV), however, that translation can be misunderstood as well. The problem is caused by the custom of begging people to stay when they really feel it is time to leave. Custom (and sometimes love) dictates that the person who is trying to leave is begged to stay, and so often they give in and stay. But usually after a while (often days, not hours) even the host realizes that the visitor must go, and so they “send them away” or “let them leave.” The words just mean that the host said goodbye to them and saw them off with good wishes.

**Exodus Chapter 19**

Exd 19:1

**“In the third month after the children of Israel...on that same day.”** The reference seems to be that the children of Israel came into the wilderness of Sinai “on that day” of the month, meaning the same day of the month that they left Egypt. The Passover lamb was killed on the 14th day of the first month, Nisan, and the firstborn males of Egypt died after sunset that day and therefore on the 15th day of the first month. Israel left that same day, the 15th of Nisan. So now this was the same day of the month, meaning the 15th day in the third month, so Israel had been traveling for two months.

Exd 19:2

**“the mountain.”** The mountain is called “the mountain of God” and “Horeb” in Exodus 3:1. The mountain is not called “Mount Sinai” until Exodus 19:11.

Exd 19:3

**“Moses went up to God.”** After the Exodus, Moses went up and down Mount Sinai seven times, and they all are recorded in the book of Exodus. Moses “went up to God.”

* 1st time up: Exod. 19:3. 1st time down: Exod. 19:7.
* 2nd time up: Exod. 19:8. 2nd time down: Exod. 19:14.
* 3rd time up: Exod. 19:20. 3rd time down: Exod. 19:25 [it was right after Moses’ third trip down the Mountain, when Moses was down with the people, that God spoke the Ten Commandments audibly to the people, see commentary on Exod. 19:9].
* 4th time up: Exod. 20:21. 4th time down: Exod. 24:3.
* 5th time up: Exod. 24:13-15. 5th down Exod. 32:15 [Between Moses’ fourth and fifth trips up Mount Sinai, he had taken some leaders of Israel part way up the mountain (Exod. 24:1-2, 9-10). On this fifth trip, Moses was on the Mountain 40 days and nights. During that time he received the revelation about the Tabernacle, and also the Ten Commandments on stone. He had the tablets of stone with him when he went back down, but he broke them when he saw the golden calf (Exod. 32:19)].
* 6th time up: Exod. 32:31. 6th time down: Exod. 32:34.
* 7th time up: Exod. 34:4. 7th down: Exod. 34:29 [this 7th time on Mount Sinai, Moses was again with Yahweh for 40 days and nights (cf. Exod. 34:28), and he came down with a new set (the second set) of the Ten Commandments, and his face radiated].

On Moses’ second trip up Mount Sinai, God told Moses to put boundaries around the Mountain so no one would touch the mountain. Then on his third trip up the Mountain, God again told Moses to warn the people about not touching the Mountain. Thus, Exodus 19:25 says that Moses went down Mount Sinai to the people (third trip down), and that is where he was, at the bottom of Mount Sinai with the people, when God spoke the Ten Commandments audibly, in a loud voice so everyone could hear (cf. Exod. 19:19; 20:1-2). It was later, on his fifth trip up the Mountain, that he got the first set of the Ten Commandments on stone.

When the people heard the voice of God shouting out the Ten Commandments, they were terrified and asked that they not hear the voice of God anymore (cf. Exod. 20:19). God honored that request and after that time spoke to Moses, who then communicated the Torah to Israel.

[For more on God speaking directly to Israel with a loud voice from the top of Mount Sinai, see commentary on Exod. 19:9.]

**“Say this to the house of Jacob and tell the children of Israel.”** “The house of Jacob” and “the children of Israel” are the same. Saying the same thing twice in different ways for clarity and emphasis is common in Hebrew. God was making it very clear to Moses that what He said to Moses was to be spoken to the Israelites.

Exd 19:4

**“how I carried you on eagles’ wings.”** In the biblical culture, the eagle was the strongest and most regal of birds. God was using the eagle to illustrate how powerfully and decisively He acted in bringing Israel out of Egypt.

**“and brought you *here* to me.”** God spoke here as if Mount Sinai was his earthly dwelling. God met Moses on Mount Sinai, and now He brought Moses and the Israelites back to Him. From this time on for centuries God traveled with the Israelites in a tent. There at Mount Sinai, He had Israel construct a tent, the Tabernacle, and then He traveled in it with the Israelites. God dwelt in a tent from the second year after the Exodus, which was when the Tabernacle was constructed, until Solomon built the Temple. The time from the Exodus to when the Temple began to be built was 480 years (1 Kings 6:1).

Exd 19:5

**“if you will listen, yes, listen to my voice.”** In a context like this, the word “listen” can also be used idiomatically and have the meaning “obey,” and many versions translate it that way (cf. ASV, CEB, ESV, KJV, NASB, NIV, NRSV). Some scholars refer to this as the “pregnant sense” of the word. Here in Exodus 19:5, “listen” has the meaning “listen to and obey.” Many Hebrew words are used with an idiomatic or pregnant sense (see commentary on Luke 23:42).

In this verse, the word “listen” occurs twice, “listen listen,” but the two words are in different forms, an infinitive verb and an imperfect verb. That form of doubling the verb is the figure of speech polyptoton and is done for emphasis, so that the meaning of the text is “really listen” or “listen intently.” God is very serious about having Israel listen to Him and obey Him, and that lesson carries over for us today. God wanted Israel to listen to Him, and He wants us to listen to Him.

[For more on the figure of speech polyptoton, see commentary on Gen. 2:16.]

**“for all the earth is mine.”** This is stated in another way in Psalm 24:1. However, in this case God is stating how much He loves Israel. The whole earth—all the people on the earth—are God’s, but out of them all, Israel is God’s special treasure. The reason for that is simple and straightforward: out of Israel was to come the Messiah, the Savior of the world. God needed a holy people to be the cultural incubator for His promised Messiah, and Israel was to be that source and incubator. Therefore, they were God’s special possession.

**“you will be my treasured possession.”** The idea of a “treasured possession” is a very valuable treasure. God had told the Israelites that He would be their God and they would be his people many months earlier (Exod. 6:7).

Exd 19:6

**“a kingdom of priests.”** When Israel got to Mount Sinai, God called Moses up onto the mountain and spoke with him (Exod. 19:3-6). God told Moses it was His intention to make Israel a kingdom of priests to all the other nations (v. 6), which meant that God intended for Israel to minister to the other nations and lead them to Yahweh. But God’s statement was conditional upon Israel obeying Him, and started out with “if you will listen.” God said, “if you will listen, yes, listen to my voice and keep my covenant, then you will be my own possession from among all peoples—for all the earth is mine—and you will be to me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation” (Exod. 19:5).

Things started out well. Moses led the people of Israel to the base of Mount Sinai (Exod. 19:17), and then God spoke the Ten Commandments in a loud voice from the top of the mountain (Exod. 20:1). The voice scared the people and they told Moses they did not want to hear God’s voice anymore, and that Moses could talk with God and then they would listen to Moses (Exod. 20:18-22). So God gave Moses the laws that are recorded in Exodus 21-23, and in Exodus 24:3-8, Moses told Israel what God had said. Then Moses followed that up by writing down the words God had said and he read them to the people. Israel twice stated that they would obey God (Exod. 24:3, 7), and they made a blood covenant with God that they would obey Him. Animals were sacrificed and the blood was caught in basins, and half the blood was put on God’s altar (Exod. 24:6), and half the blood was sprinkled on the people as a testimony of the covenant that they had made (Exod. 24:8). This covenant is the “Old Covenant,” usually called the “Old Testament.”

Sadly, it was only about a month later that Israel broke the first two of the Ten Commandments and all the laws God had given them about not worshiping pagan gods. They made a golden calf god and claimed it had brought them out of Egypt (Exod. 32:1-6). God and Moses were furious, and Moses called out, “Whoever is on Yahweh’s side, come to me!” At that point, “All the sons of Levi gathered themselves together to him” (Exod. 32:26). The Levites were bold in their defense of the worship of Yahweh and killed about 3,000 idolaters that day (Exod. 32:28).

The result of the unfaithfulness of the people of Israel was that God did not make them a kingdom of priests like He had intended, while the result of the faithfulness of the people of the tribe of Levi is that God chose them to minister as priests and Levites to Him (Num. 1:47-53).

[For more on God speaking the Ten Commandments directly to the Israelites, see commentary on Exod. 19:9. For more on Moses’ seven trips up and down Mount Sinai, see commentary on Exod. 19:3.]

**“and a holy nation.”** After Israel left Egypt, God stopped dealing with them as a family, the descendants of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, and began dealing with them as a nation, as He says here. Little is known about the time from Adam to after Noah’s Flood. It is over 1,600 years, yet it only takes 11 chapters in the Bible. In contrast, to cover the last 1,000 years of the Old Testament it takes all the books of the Bible from 2 Samuel through the Four Gospels and the time of Christ. From Seth until the Exodus the Bible follows the development of one family that goes from Seth through Abraham (Gen. 11:10-32), then Isaac and Jacob, then to Jacob’s 12 sons and their children, and ends with the Exodus. After the Exodus, God dealt with Israel as a nation (cf. Exod. 19:6).

Exd 19:7

**“So Moses went.”** This is referring to Moses going back to the camp of Israel at the foot of Mount Sinai. This is Moses’ first trip down Mount Sinai. He went up in Exodus 19:3.

[For more on Moses’ seven trips up and down Mount Sinai, see commentary on Exod. 19:3.]

Exd 19:8

**“Then Moses brought the words of the people back to Yahweh.”** Yahweh was on the top of Mount Sinai, and so this was Moses’ second trip up Mount Sinai, in which he brought the words of the people back to Yahweh. God gives Moses more instructions for the children of Israel, and Moses takes those instructions to Israel when he goes back down Mount Sinai on his second time down (Exod. 19:14).

[For more on Moses’ seven trips up and down Mount Sinai, see commentary on Exod. 19:3. For more on God speaking directly to Israel with a loud voice from the top of Mount Sinai, see commentary on Exod. 19:9.]

Exd 19:9

**“thick cloud.”** The Hebrew text uses two different words that both mean “cloud” here. In essence, a literal translation would be “I come to you in a cloud cloud,” which most likely means a thick cloud.

**“so that the people will hear when I speak with you.”** It is commonly taught that the first time Israel got the Ten Commandments was when Moses came down Mount Sinai with them, but that is not correct. The first time Israel got the Ten Commandments was when God personally spoke them in a loud voice from Mount Sinai to the people of Israel at the foot of the mountain (Exod. 20:1-17). Then, after that, Moses went up on Mount Sinai and got the commandments on stone tablets—but Moses broke those first tablets (Exod. 24:15-18; 31:18; 32:19). Then Moses went up again to the top of Mount Sinai with a second set of stone tablets that God commanded Moses to make, and then God wrote the Ten Commandments again on that second set of tablets (Exod. 34:1-4; cf. Deut. 9:10-11, 15-17; 10:1-5).

God spoke the Ten Commandments in a loud voice to the Israelites between Moses’ third and fourth time up Mount Sinai. It was later, on Moses’ fifth trip up Mount Sinai, that God wrote the Ten Commandments on stone and gave them to him, but Moses broke those tablets. It was on Moses’ seventh and final trip up Mount Sinai that Moses got the Ten Commandments that he then put in the ark of the covenant.

The Bible says in a number of places that the children of Israel heard the Ten Commandments spoken by God (cf. Exod. 20:22; Deut. 4:10-13, 15, 36; 5:4-6, 22-27; 18:16; Neh. 9:13; Heb. 12:18-21). God spoke audibly to people on a number of occasions. He spoke to Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden (Gen. 3:9ff), and He often spoke audibly to Moses (Num. 7:89). He also occasionally came into human form and appeared to people (see commentary on Acts 7:55).

The voice of God frightened the Israelites, so they asked that God not speak directly to them anymore, but that He would speak to Moses and Moses then could tell them what He said (Exod. 20:19-21). So it was that the rest of the Law of Moses was given by God to Moses who then told the people.

[For more information on Moses’ seven trips up Mount Sinai, see commentary on Exod. 19:3.]

**“so that they will also trust.”** The “so that” is distributed from the earlier part of the sentence.

Exd 19:10

**“and make them holy today and tomorrow.”** “To make holy” is “to set apart [for God],” and it is often translated as “sanctify.” The people had been in Egypt and traveling. Now God wants the people to prepare themselves to be in His presence. In essence, what God says here is “Take today and tomorrow and make the people holy so they can meet with me.” And then God will meet with them on the third day (Exod. 19:11). So the people will take two days to make themselves holy and on the third day they will meet with God.

The process of Israel sanctifying themselves—making themselves holy in God’s sight—took two days because many of the people were unclean for various reasons and both they and their clothes had to be washed and made clean and thus “holy” before God.

**“have them wash their garments.”** This may have taken a while because there was apparently not an abundance of water.

Exd 19:12

**“set boundaries for the people all around *the mountain*.”** The boundary was around the mountain, as Exodus 19:23 says.

**“death, yes, death.”** The Hebrew text contains the figure of speech polyptoton.

[For more on polyptoton and the way it is translated in the REV, see commentary on Gen. 2:16.]

[See Word Study: “Polyptoton.”]

Exd 19:13

**“When the shofar sounds a long blast, they are to come up to the mountain.”** The people were not to even touch the mountain until Yahweh invited them. Then, when He invited them with a loud shofar blast, they were to come a little ways up the mountain (Exod. 19:17).

**“shofar.”** The ram’s horn trumpet, not the metal trumpet.

**“they are to come up.”** The Hebrew can also be understood as “they may come up,” but the Hebrew seems stronger than just “may” (cf. ASV, AMP, Darby, ESV, Geneva, KJV. Cf. “they must go up” NJB). So, God told Israel that when they heard the shofar sounding a long blast, they were to cross the boundary and come up to the mountain.

Exd 19:14

**“So Moses went down from the mountain.”** This is Moses’ second time down Mount Sinai, and he brought more instructions from Yahweh down to the people. He had gone up for a second time in Exodus 19:8. Moses’ next (and third) trip up Mount Sinai is in Exodus 19:20.

[For more on Moses’ seven trips up and down Mount Sinai, see commentary on Exod. 19:3. For more on God speaking directly to Israel with a loud voice from the top of Mount Sinai, see commentary on Exod. 19:9.]

Exd 19:15

**“Prepare *yourselves*.”** The verb is in the Niphal tense which can sometimes be reflexive (cf. CEB) but the REV puts the “yourselves” in italics because it is not clearly in the text although it is implied.

**“do not have sexual relations with a woman.”** The Hebrew text uses an idiom: “do not touch a woman” (cf. Ruth 2:9; 1 Cor. 7:1). Having sex made the man and woman levitically unclean in the sight of God (Lev. 15:16-18), and these days were a time of ritual cleansing.

Exd 19:16

**“dense cloud.”** Literally, “heavy cloud.”

**“shofar.”** The ram’s horn trumpet, not the metal trumpet.

**“trembled.”** This is the Hebrew word *charad* (#02729 חָרַד), which means “trembled.”

Exd 19:17

**“and they stood on the lower part of the mountain.”** At this point, the people had crossed the boundary and had gone a little ways up Mount Sinai.

Exd 19:19

**“shofar.”** The ram’s horn trumpet, not the metal trumpet.

Exd 19:20

**“Yahweh called Moses to the top of the mountain.”** Yahweh had come down in fire, and He came to the top of the mountain.

**“and Moses went up.”** Exodus 19:20 is Moses’ third trip up Mount Sinai. On this trip, Yahweh has warnings for the Israelites, which Moses brought back to Israel when he went down Mount Sinai for the third time (Exod. 19:25). Moses goes up Mount Sinai for the fourth time in Exodus 20:21. He apparently was not gone long that time, and he got the laws referred to as “the Book of the Covenant” on that fourth trip (see commentary on Exod. 20:21).

[For more on Moses’ seven trips up and down Mount Sinai, see commentary on Exod. 19:3.]

Exd 19:21

**“so that they do not break away *from the congregation*.”** Most English Bibles translate Exodus 19:21 similarly to the ESV: “warn the people, lest they break through to the LORD.” That makes it seem like Moses is going to warn the whole congregation so that they don’t break through the barrier (or the cloud) to see Yahweh. But the Hebrew word translated as “break through” usually does not have that meaning. It has more the meaning of tear something down, ruin, or break away, although HALOT does give “break through” as the definition here but nowhere else. It seems like the whole congregation would never try to break through to see God, they were usually more cautious or even frightened than that. It seems that God is warning the congregation so that the ones who would be tempted to try to see God up close would not do that. Furthermore, that explains why only “many” of them would perish. If they all saw God, ostensibly all of them would perish, but if only some of them broke through, only those people would perish.

Rabbi Rashi catches the meaning of the verb. It means to “break,” that is, break off a part from a whole. A part of the people would break away from the congregation to see Yahweh and they would die. Rashi writes: “lest they break their position [i.e., their ranks] because of their longing for God, to see [Him], and they move too close to the side of the mountain. Every [expression of] הִרִיסָה [denotes] the separation of the collection of [the parts of] the building. Likewise, those who separate from the position of people break up that position.”[[29]](#footnote-12605)

**“many of them perish.”** The people who would disobey Moses and break away from the rest of the congregation to get close and see Yahweh would die, which is why the text would end with, “and MANY of them*—not ALL the congregation, but only the ones who left the congregation to see Yahweh—*would perish.”

**“perish.”** The Hebrew is literally “fall,” but it means “perish,” “die.”

Exd 19:25

**“So Moses went down to the people.”** This is Moses’ third time down Mount Sinai. He had gone up to speak with God in Exodus 19:20, and now at Exodus 19:25 he went back down the mountain to bring God’s warning to the people. This trip down Mount Sinai puts Moses down with the people when God spoke the Ten Commandments off Mount Sinai with a loud voice. Moses did not go back up Mount Sinai until Exodus 20:21.

[For more on Moses’ seven trips up and down Mount Sinai, see commentary on Exod. 19:3. For more on God speaking directly to Israel with a loud voice from the top of Mount Sinai, see commentary on Exod. 19:9.]

**Exodus Chapter 20**

Exd 20:1

**“Then God spoke.”** The Ten Commandments were audibly spoken by God from the top of Mount Sinai to the people between Moses’ third and fourth trip up Mount Sinai. The fact that the text says that “God [Elohim] spoke,” and not “Yahweh spoke” points to the fact that these commands were to be applicable to all people, not just the Israelites, who had a covenant relationship with God. The people were frightened by the voice of God and asked that He not speak to them anymore (Exod. 20:19, 22; Deut. 5:4, 22-27).

It is commonly taught that the first time Israel got the Ten Commandments was when Moses came down Mount Sinai with them, but that is not accurate. Israel personally had the Ten Commandments spoken to them directly by God (Exod. 20:1. Cf. Exod. 20:22; Deut. 4:10-13, 15, 36; 5:4-6, 22-27; 18:16; Neh. 9:13; Heb. 12:18-21). It was more than a month later that Moses went up on Mount Sinai and got the commandments on stone—and even then Moses broke those first tablets (Exod. 24:15-18; 31:18; 32:19). The second set of stone tablets was made by Moses but written on by God (Exod. 34:1-4; cf. Deut. 9:10-11,15-17; 10:1-5).

At this time, when Yahweh spoke the Ten Commandments to Israel, Moses was down at the foot of the Mountain with the people. He had come down (his third trip down) in Exodus 19:25, and he did not go back up for his fourth time up until Exodus 20:21, and he came back down with an important part of the Law in Exodus 24:3.

[For more on God speaking the Ten Commandments directly to the Israelites, see commentary on Exod. 19:9. For more on Moses’ seven trips up and down Mount Sinai, see commentary on Exod. 19:3.]

Exd 20:2

**“I am Yahweh your God.”** The First Commandment of the Ten Commandments is two verses long (Exod. 20:2-3). The Ten Commandments occur here in Exodus 20 and also in Deuteronomy 5.

Exd 20:3

**“You must not.”** Exodus 20:3 is part of the first commandment and is the closing part of the sentence started in Exodus 20:2.

The “you” is singular and is derived from the imperfect verb, which is singular. The Hebrew is more literally, “Not will be to you.” The word “must” in the REV translation comes from the imperfect verb and the context and scope of Scripture. The NET (First Edition) text note reads, “The negative with the imperfect [verb] expresses the emphatic prohibition; it is best reflected with ‘you will not’ and has the strongest expectation of obedience.”

The concern about the English translation, “you will not,” is that, while it is accurate and in Hebrew expresses an emphatic prohibition, in English, it expresses a future prohibition and one that could be confusing because it often turned out not to be factually true, such as when Israel worshiped pagan gods. The problem with the translation “You shall not” or “You shall have no” (ESV, NASB) is that it uses English that is almost never used anymore and can be unclear. Years ago the first-person use of “shall” referred to a future event while the second-person and third-person use of “shall” expressed strong determination, but now “shall” is used interchangeably with “will” and can express a prohibition or refer to a future event according to the context, but few people know that. The translation, “Do not have” (HCSB) is good, but perhaps does not express the emphatic nature of the command, whereas the translation, “You must not have” (NLT) was clear and also captured the emphatic nature of the command. The Ten Commandments are not just “good ideas,” they are God’s emphatic commands.

The impact of the singular instead of the plural in God’s commands cannot be overstated. The “you” is singular, and referred to Israel as a singular group, a “family,” a community. God was speaking to all of the Israelites: they all heard His voice speaking the Ten Commandments. But the singular “you” also can carry the idea that God’s commandments were meant to be believed and acted upon individually by each person, and they continue to echo down through the ages in that same way. Each person decides for themself if they will keep God’s commands or ignore or defy them, and each person will stand before Christ on the Day of Judgment and be acquitted or condemned based on their obedience or disobedience to God. An expanded, but somewhat awkward, translation of Exodus 20:3 might be: “Each of you must not have any gods besides me,” or perhaps, “None of you is to have any other God besides me.” That same idea goes for all Ten Commandments. Each of us must honor our parents. Each of us must not murder. Each of us must not steal, and so forth.

**“gods.”** Although Elohim can be “god” or “gods,” in this case the word “other” is plural, so Elohim in this context is plural and means “gods.” Although gods get worshiped in the heart, in the biblical culture they were almost always represented by idols—visible statues and images that anyone could see. Idolatry in the ancient world was almost always a very visible and tangible thing. This was actually one of the reasons so many Israelites worshiped Yahweh and other gods too. The people wanted gods they could see, and it was hard for many of them to worship a God that had no image at all, he was just “somehow there with them.”

**“besides me.”** In the phrase, “besides me,” the word “besides” is translated from the Hebrew preposition *al*, and the Hebrew phrase is *al panai* (עַל־פָּנָיַ), more literally, “before my face” or even “upon my face.” The preposition *al*, like many prepositions, has many meanings and many nuances that apply in different contexts. The meanings and nuances of *al* include “on, upon, in front of, before, upon, over, above, beside, on the side of, on account of, concerning, according to, against, towards,” and more.[[30]](#footnote-24855) The various meanings allow for various ways of understanding the text, which in part explains the protracted discussions that rabbis and scholars have over the meaning of the text.

Often a given verse has several meanings that are all true to some extent. In the context of Exodus 20:3, the primary meaning is that Israel was to have no other God or gods besides Yahweh. Maxie Dunnam writes: “No other ancient law code has been found that prohibits worship of other gods. This commandment—belief in one God—sets the Israelite religion apart from all other Ancient Near East religions and was responsible for shaping the monotheistic faith of Israel. The call is for undivided allegiance, total commitment. ‘Before me,’ literally translated, is ‘against my face,’ and the phrase expresses God’s insistence that he is to be the only God of Israel.”[[31]](#footnote-13166)

Possible translations of the Hebrew phrase include, “before me,” “before my face,” “in my presence,” and “upon my face.” Verses such as Exodus 20:3 (cf. Deut. 5:7), Deuteronomy 6:4-5 (the “Shema”), and many other verses warning about worshiping “other gods” show that God absolutely did not want the worship due to Him alone going to other gods.

Although understanding Exodus 20:3 as saying “upon my face” is not common, it is a possible meaning, and could be a secondary meaning to the verse. If so, it would refer to the idea of putting a “false face” on God, putting a mask on Him, so to speak, and thus worshiping Him in a false way and attributing to Him erroneous things (cf. 2 Kings 17:9).

Sadly, the worship of “other gods” disguised itself and migrated into Christianity in different forms that still had the same effect as the idols: taking glory and attention away from the One True God. In the ancient world, people worshiped pagan gods to get the blessings that those gods promised, or to get protection from harm. It was not beyond the pagan gods (actually, the demons represented by the gods) to hurt the people who refused to worship them, or worship them properly. For the most part, modern Christians don’t worship pagan gods, but they have often replaced the worship of pagan gods with other practices that steal the glory that should be given to God. For example, having “lucky” objects to influence what happens, having protective amulets or objects, or participating in practices that supposedly bring blessings or ward off evil, such as knocking on wood, having sage in the house, throwing salt over one’s shoulder, wearing a “Saint Christopher” medallion, or putting prayer hands in your car.

“Lucky” objects, or things that ward off evil, have existed in Christianity since the very beginning. For whatever reason, God’s people just do not let go of them. Early Christians used lucky objects and amulets just like the pagan Romans did. There is evidence that some Christian ministers spoke out about those practices, but other ministers participated in the practices and some ministers in the older denominations still do. In his article “Christian Amulets—A Bit of Old, a Bit of New,” Theodore de Bruyn of the Department of Classics and Religious Studies at the University of Ottawa says that the advent of Christianity did not put an end to the pagan practice of wearing protection amulets. De Bruyn writes: “Rather, the new faith [i.e., Christianity] brought an adaptation of the existing pagan practice.”[[32]](#footnote-17335) Indeed it did. We no longer sacrifice to Baal to gain blessings and protection, now we knock on wood or throw salt or do something else. All those superstitious practices that steal glory from God can be replaced by a strong Faith and prayer life, and by occasionally saying a quick prayer right when it seems needed. “Where does my help come from? My help is from Yahweh, the Creator of heaven and earth. He is their help and their shield” (Ps. 121:1-2; 115:11).

Exd 20:4

**“Do not make for yourself a carved image.”** Exodus 20:4-6 is the Second Commandment of the Ten Commandments, and the Second Commandment is three verses long, Exodus 20:4-6. The verb “make” is in the second person singular, but it is a collective singular and refers to Israel as a singular group, a “family,” a community. God was speaking to all of the Israelites: they all heard His voice speaking the Ten Commandments. But the singular “you” also can carry the idea that God’s commandments were meant to be believed and acted upon individually by each person, and they continue to echo down through the ages in that same way (see commentary on Exod. 20:3, “you”).

**“carved image.”** In the biblical culture, this would include any image carved out of wood or stone. In its larger sense, it would also include images made in other ways as well. That is similar to Ephesians 5:18 which says not to be drunk on wine, but filled with the spirit. It is not like getting drunk on wine is forbidden but getting drunk on vodka is not. The wine is representative, and here in Exodus, the “carved image” is representative of other things that get worshiped. Leviticus 26:1 mentions other forbidden objects.

Exd 20:5

**“bow down.”** The common biblical way of bowing down before people or God was to fall to one’s knees and bow the upper body to the earth. It is the same Hebrew word as “worship.”

[For more on bowing down, see Word Study: “Worship.”]

**“jealous.”** God is a jealous God, not an envious God. Although in some languages the English words “jealousy” and “envy” are translated from the same word, envy and jealousy are not the same thing. “Envy” is when I don’t have something that someone else has and I want it, so I am envious. In contrast, “jealousy” is when I have something and I am afraid someone else will take it from me, so I am jealous. That is why we speak of a “jealous” husband; he is married to the wife but is afraid another man will lure her away from him. God is a “jealous” God in the sense that He is the God and Lord of people, but other gods and other interests are working to take His people away from Him. Interestingly, the cognate word to the Hebrew word for jealous here in Exodus 20:5 refers to being “red,” and we can picture God becoming hot—red-faced—with emotion when some other god tries to steal His people.

Rabbi Nahum Sarna writes, “The Hebrew stem *k-n-’*, in its primitive meanings, seems to have denoted ‘to become intensely red.’ Because extreme and intense emotions affect facial coloration, the term came, by extension, to express ardor, zeal, rage, and jealousy. It is used in a variety of contexts, even with God as the referent. ...the present epithet is most frequently translated ‘a jealous God,’ a rendering that understands the marriage bond to be the implied metaphor for the covenant between God and his people. God demands exclusive loyalty from Israel, and, according to this interpretation, His reaction to their infidelity is expressed in terms of human jealousy.”[[33]](#footnote-17522)

**“visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children.”** The Hebrew verb translated “visiting” is *paqad* (#06485 פָּקַד), and it often describes a divine intervention for blessing or cursing; the coming of good or evil. The NET text note on Genesis 21:1, when God “visited” Sarah, points out that when God “visits” that it “indicates God’s special attention to an individual or a matter, always with respect to his people’s destiny. He may visit (that is, destroy) the Amalekites [1 Sam. 15:2]; he may visit (that is, deliver) his people in Egypt [cf. Exod. 3:16]. …One’s destiny is changed when the LORD ‘visits.’” Here in Exodus 20:5 (cf. Exod. 34:7; Num. 14:18), God “visits” the iniquity of the parents on the children.

The Bible has many examples of people being “visited” for good or for harm. For example, in Genesis 21:1, God visited Sarah and she got pregnant (cf. 1 Sam. 2:21). In Genesis 50:24-25, Joseph said God would visit Israel and bring them out of Egypt. In Exodus 3:16, God said he had visited the Israelites in slavery in Egypt, meaning He had seen their circumstances and had begun the process of delivering them. In Ruth 1:6, God “visited” Israel by ending the famine so there would be food. In Psalm 106:4, the psalmist asks to be “visited” with deliverance.

People can be visited for harm as well as for good. In Psalm 59:5, the psalmist asks God to “visit” (punish) the nations, and in Psalm 89:32, God said he would “visit” with a rod because of people’s transgression. Proverbs 19:23 says the person who fears God will not be visited with evil. Isaiah 26:21 speaks of God coming to punish (“visit”) the inhabitants of the earth for their iniquity (cf. Jer. 50:27). God often “visits” to punish, and so “punish” is one of the meanings of *paqad*.

**“third and fourth *generation*.”** This seems unreasonable to us today, but that is in part due to the fact that for most of us, our grandparents are over 50 and our great-grandparents are dead or close to death by the time we are born. That was not the case in the biblical world. It was quite common for a woman to have a child by 15, and thus become a grandparent at around 30, a great-grandparent at about 45, and a great-great-grandparent around 60. Also, in contrast to today, in the biblical world families generally either lived together or in very close proximity. So if a person truly hated God and was sinful, hateful, and devilish, the sin he would commit and the effects of that sin would affect everyone in his family for generations.

Parents can sin in such a way that their houses are afflicted by demons and their children are cursed. Furthermore, although those curses can be broken, they still adversely affect the children while they are in place. Also, it is common that children pick up the habits of the parents and members of the household such that the children end up participating in the evil of the parents and thus bring the consequences of their own sin upon them.

Ezekiel 18:20 says that the sons will not suffer punishment for the sins of the fathers, but that promise does not cover every sin. For one thing, we all know children who have suffered due to their parent’s sin. The context of Ezekiel 18:20 is everlasting life or everlasting death, and it is true that a parent’s sin and rejection of salvation will not keep a child from being saved. In contrast, one reason that parents should avoid sin and ungodliness is that it can harm the children, just as Exodus 20:5 says.

Exd 20:6

**“to the thousandth *generation*.”** This is hyperbole, meaning the blessing goes on and on.

Exd 20:7

**“Do not misuse the name of Yahweh”** This is the Third Commandment, and it is just one verse long. The verb in the first phrase is a collective singular (see commentary on Exod. 20:4).

**“misuse the name of Yahweh.”** God’s name is holy, and people should treat it with respect. This command is often taught as if it meant, “Do not cuss using the name of God (or Jesus),” but it means much more than that. In fullness, it means that people are not to use God’s name for any useless, ungodly, or frivolous purpose. This would of course refer to using God’s name as a cuss word or obscenity, but it would also include many other useless or ungodly purposes. For example, no one is to use God’s name falsely in an oath. In the courtrooms in the USA, people swear on a Bible that they will tell the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth “so help me God,” but some of the people who swear that oath then lie. That is misusing the name of Yahweh. Historically many people have sworn in court using God’s name so they seem sincere and hope to avoid getting caught. But the last half of the verse should weigh heavily upon them—“for Yahweh will not hold anyone guiltless who misuses his name”—because God always knows who misuses His name, and it is a serious sin. It shows the disregard that people have for God, that they are more afraid of being caught in a crime by a human court than by God Almighty.

The command not to misuse the name of God was also important because in both ancient and modern times it was common practice to recite the name of God (or a god) as a part of the practice of magic, sorcery, or divination (sometimes the names were spelled or pronounced backwards). That is a terrible misuse of God’s name because God abhors the practice of magic and divination (Deut. 18:9-14).

In its larger sense, the “name” of God also includes the other designations by which He is known other than just “Yahweh.” We are not to misuse “names” such as El Shaddai, Elohim, the Holy One of Israel, etc. Isaiah 8:13 shows us the proper attitude we are to hold toward God: “Yahweh of Armies is who you must respect as holy. He is the one you must fear. He is the one you must dread.” The New Testament tells us to regard Jesus Christ that same way: “but in your hearts, set the Lord Christ apart as holy” (1 Pet. 3:15). Christians are not to use obscenity (Eph. 5:4), but are to speak the truth in love (Eph. 4:15).

[For more on not using obscenity, see commentary on Eph. 5:4.]

**“Yahweh will not hold anyone guiltless who misuses his name.”** This is an understatement, a tapeinosis. Something is understated in order to magnify it. Thus, the intended meaning is that God will hold guilty anyone who misuses His name (see commentary on Exod. 23:7).

Exd 20:8

**“Remember the Sabbath day.”** This is the Fourth Commandment, and it is four verses long, Exodus 20:8-11. In Deuteronomy 5:12 the Hebrew text reads, “guard the Sabbath.”

It can be quite easy to lose track of which day of the week it is and to accidentally ignore the Sabbath, or to get so pressed with things to do that it just does not seem as important to obey the Sabbath as to get that “important” work done. People face that kind of thing all the time when they ignore some things in order to do “more important” things. In God’s eyes, Israel keeping the Sabbath was one of the things they had to remember and take time to do.

There are people who try to use the word “remember” to assert that the Sabbath had been a regular institution far back into the past, but there is no evidence for that and no reason to take the word “remember” that way. If a mother tells a child, “remember to take your vitamins,” it does not mean he or she has been taking vitamins for a long time. In this case, since the Ten Commandments were given in the third month after leaving Egypt (Exod. 19:1) and the Sabbath was introduced one month after Israel left Egypt (Exod. 16:1), then Israel had only kept something like six Sabbath days.

[For more on the Sabbath, see commentary on Exod. 20:10.]

Exd 20:9

**“You.”** The “you” is singular from the singular verbs. See commentary on Exodus 20:4.

Exd 20:10

**“the seventh day is a Sabbath to Yahweh.”** The word “Sabbath,” *shabbat* (#07676 שַׁבָּת) almost certainly comes from a Hebrew word for “rest, cease, stop,” *shabbaton* (#07677 שַׁבָּתוֹן), and both words appear in Exodus 16:23: “Tomorrow is to be a day of rest [*shabbaton*], a holy Sabbath [*shabbat*]” (NIV84); “Tomorrow is a time of cessation from work, a holy Sabbath” (NET). Some English versions use the word “sabbath” twice (cf. NASB: “Tomorrow is a Sabbath observance, a holy Sabbath”) but having “Sabbath” twice is more confusing than clarifying because although the Hebrew words are related, they are different, and furthermore, the Sabbath as a regular institution and day of rest for Israel had not been established yet.

When God created the world as we know it, He rested on the seventh day, which was a Saturday. In the biblical reckoning of time, Sunday is the first day of the week and Saturday is the seventh, which is why the Jewish Sabbath is on Saturday. The origin and inculcation of the seven-day week in ancient cultures have been lost in history, but there is little doubt that it came from God and was passed from Adam and Eve to their descendants, even though some cultures abandoned it. Adam lived more than 900 years and would have passed on the information about creation to his descendants.

Evidence that God established the seven-day week comes from the fact that it does not seem to come from anywhere else and it is humanitarian in its effect—as it was originally given by God it was a blessing to people. The seven-day week is not tied to the planets or planetary motion, or the motion or phases of the moon, or from a solar or sidereal year (a sidereal year is a year based on the motion of the stars). Furthermore, it is the nature and tendency of rulers to overwork the people they rule, and thus the very nature of the Hebrew Sabbath is against the natural inclination of all but the most godly of rulers. There is no good reason to reject what the Bible clearly states: the Sabbath came from God.

Although the word “sabbath” is not used in Genesis chapter 2 (Gen. 2:2 uses *shavath,* #07673 שָׁבַת, a closely related word), God gives the fact that He “stopped” working and “rested” on the seventh day of creation as the reason for His choosing the seventh day as the day the people of Israel were to cease from working (Gen. 2:1-3; Exod. 20:11). Nevertheless, there is no biblical account of anyone recognizing a weekly day of rest until after the Exodus, when God commanded it for Israel. So even if it was known that God rested on the seventh day of creation, that information did not influence how people behaved in their daily lives. Exodus 16:23 is when God introduced the idea that the seventh day, Saturday, was to be a regular day of rest for His people.

As we examine God’s commanding a regular Saturday Sabbath for Israel, it is helpful to see at least three different important aspects. The Sabbath was not a regular institution for the people of God until God commanded it for Israel; it was specifically given to Israel; and it was given to Israel to help them remember the harsh slavery they were subjected to in Egypt, which did not have any regular rest days, and thus ostensibly so they would not treat anyone as they were treated in Egypt.

The regular Saturday Sabbath was not observed by anyone in the Bible before God gave it to Israel after the Exodus. This should speak very loudly to people who assert it is the will of God for everyone to keep the Sabbath today. Conservative scholars agree that Adam and Eve were created about 4,000 BC, and the Exodus was about 1,450 BC. That means that God did not give any commands concerning a Sabbath or day of rest for the first 2,500 years of human life on earth—more than half of the time of the Old Testament. This shows that people having a regular day of rest was not of great concern for God in contrast to other things about which God did give specific commands. People knew the difference between good and evil at the time of the Fall, and God expected people to do good (Gen. 3:22). God gave commands about sacrifices and offerings as early as Cain and Abel (Gen. 4:3-7). People knew about “clean” and “unclean” animals before Noah’s Flood (Gen. 7:2), and God commanded people not to eat blood right after the Flood (Gen. 9:4). Furthermore, it was right after the Flood that God said that people had the right and responsibility to punish criminals (Gen. 9:6). But in that entire 2,500-year period, God never said a word about keeping a regular day of rest. It was only after the Exodus that He commanded Israel to observe a regular day of rest, and that command was one of the Ten Commandments, part of the Law of Moses.

The fact that the Sabbath was not a regular day of rest until after the Exodus explains what we see in the text in Exodus 16. For one thing, it explains why God introduces the day of rest the way He does. It is quite obvious in the text that God did not expect the people to be already keeping the Sabbath. For example, He did not say, “Hey, tomorrow is the Sabbath, so you need to prepare the manna for two days just like you do your regular food, remember, no cooking on the Sabbath!” Instead, God explains the Sabbath by saying, “Tomorrow is a *day of* rest,” and then He calls it “a holy Sabbath.” Also, that the people were not used to keeping a Sabbath explains why even though God told them it was a day of rest and that manna would not appear on the ground, “some of the people went out to gather” (Exod. 16:27). God got upset with the people for that, but nothing like what happened some years later, after the Sabbath had been firmly established as one of the Ten Commandments. Years after the Sabbath was established as one of the Ten Commandments, a man who gathered wood on Sabbath day was stoned to death (Num. 15:32-36).

Another thing about the Sabbath is that it was given specifically to Israel. God introduced it to Israel when He first gave manna (Exod. 16:23-30), but at that time there is no indication that the people understood that the Sabbath was to be a perpetual ordinance, nor is there any indication the Israelites knew anything about the extent of it, for example, that it even applied to a stranger who was in Israel (Exod. 20:10).

Although God said He chose the seventh day of the week to be the Sabbath because that was when He rested from His work, He did not explain why He decided that Israel should keep the Sabbath until He explained it in Deuteronomy. In Deuteronomy 5:15 God said that He gave the Sabbath so that Israel would remember that they were slaves in Egypt and God delivered them, “therefore Yahweh your God commanded you to keep the Sabbath day.” So Deuteronomy 5:15 makes it clear that God did not command people to keep the Sabbath Day before the Exodus. It also makes it clear that the Sabbath was commanded to “you,” Israel, and furthermore, it makes it clear that part of the purpose of the Sabbath was so Israel would remember that it was Yahweh who delivered them from slavery so they, and their families, servants, and visitors, could enjoy a day of rest rather than constantly be working as they likely had been doing as slaves in Egypt.

Once we understand the Sabbath, including when and to whom it was given, we are in a better position to understand the Sabbath and the Christian Church. The regular seventh-day Sabbath was part of the Mosaic Law and was given to the Jews. It was not a “universal” regulation given to all people, nor is there any indication it was to extend beyond the time Jesus fulfilled the Law. There is no verse in the writings to the Christian Church (Acts-Jude) that indicates a Christian has an obligation to keep the Sabbath. In fact, the argument from silence on this point is shouting very loudly, because no Christian in Acts or the New Testament Epistles is ever said to have kept the Sabbath. On the Sabbath day, Paul and others went into synagogues and places where people were worshiping, but that is because that is when and where the people they wanted to speak to were gathered; there is no statement about Paul or others going to the synagogue in order to keep the regulations of the Sabbath. For example, there is no statement in Acts or the Epistles that Paul did not travel on the Sabbath day, when Jewish Sabbath law would have limited him to only going about two-thirds of a mile. Furthermore, in the great church council in Acts 15, men of the Pharisees claimed that Gentile Christians needed to be circumcised and “keep the Law of Moses” (Acts 15:5), but even Peter said that was not the case (Acts 15:6-11). The conclusion of the council was that the Gentiles should abstain from idols, sexual immorality, and defiled meat and blood, but not a word was said about them keeping the Sabbath (Acts 15:24-29). This is very important when we realize that as Gentiles in the Roman world, they would have partaken of all of those activities; idols, sex, and defiled meat, and also would not have kept the Sabbath. So if there was a need for believers to keep the Sabbath it seems it would have been mentioned, but the fact that it is not mentioned fits with what the New Testament Epistles say about the regulations of the Law and specifically the Sabbath.

In Colossians 2:16-17, Paul wrote to the Church at Colossae and told them not to let anyone judge them about what they ate and drank or with respect to special days or the Sabbath, and he pointed out that those things were a “shadow” of the things to come but the reality was Christ. So the Sabbath was a shadow that pointed to the reality of the “Sabbath-rest” that we all have in Christ, of which the best is yet to come.

Occasionally people who think God still commands believers to keep the Sabbath assert that the word “Sabbath” in Colossians does not refer to the Jewish Sabbath, but it does. The Greek word is *sabbaton* (#4521 σάββατον), and it is the same word that is used for the Jewish Sabbath in the Septuagint and the New Testament to refer to the Sabbath. In fact, in the New Testament, the word *sabbaton* occurs almost 70 times and it is only used two ways: firstly, for the weekly Sabbath or a special Sabbath, and secondly in its idiomatic use to mean “a week,” and it is only used to refer to a week about a dozen times, and in the majority of those uses “sabbath” is plural, “sabbaths” (cf. Matt. 28:1; Mark 16:2; Acts 20:7). There is no place in the New Testament where *sabbaton* is used of some kind of general “rest.” Thus there is no lexical or contextual reason to say that in Colossians 2 the word “Sabbath” does not include referring to the regular weekly Sabbath.

Can a person keep the Sabbath or a special day if they want to? Certainly. Paul wrote, “One person judges one day *to be* above *another* day, while another judges every day *alike*. Each person must be fully convinced in his own mind” (Rom. 14:5).

Despite the fact that Christians do not need to keep the Sabbath Day, the Sabbath contains many important lessons and principles. One is that people do need to rest. God rested, and studies show that it is healthy for people to regularly take some time to rest and disengage from the pressures of life. Another lesson is that it is not good or godly to expect people to work every day without a day of rest. People are not slaves to the “god of production.” Having a regular time to dedicate to God and family is the heart of our Father God, and the Sabbath made sure that happened.

**“On it you must not do any work.”** At first glance, this list seems very inclusive, but it leaves out “wives.” This is in contrast to the tenth commandment, Exodus 20:17 about coveting, which mentions not to covet your neighbor’s wife. The list seems purposely inclusive, mentioning “you, your son, your daughter, your male servant, your female servant, and the ‘stranger who is inside your gates,’” but then it leaves out “your wife.” Although the text leaves out wives, it does not explain why. However, it seems likely that wives are left out because caring for babies and small children is a lot of physical work and there is no “day off” for mothers with babies and/or young children. We can see that if wives were included in the list, they might be confused and conflicted about the work they have to do to raise their small children. Although we might tend to think, “Well, it is common sense that mothering small children requires work on the Sabbath,” it is amazing how “religious” and unreasonable some people can be about godly commandments.

**“sojourner.”** The Hebrew word translated as “sojourner” is *toshav* (#08453, spelled תּוֹשָׁב or תֹּשָׁב), and it has a range of meanings but generally refers to a temporary resident or a resident alien (see commentary on Gen. 23:4).

Exd 20:12

**“Honor your father and your mother.”** This is the fifth of the Ten Commandments, and it is one verse long. The verb “honor” is singular, but it is a collective singular (see commentary on Exod. 20:4). This commandment is repeated several times in the Mosaic Law (Exod. 20:12; Deut. 5:16; Lev. 19:3).

Exd 20:13

**“Do not murder.”** This is the sixth of the Ten Commandments.

**“murder.”** The Hebrew word translated murder in the REV, but “kill” in the King James Version, is *ratsach* (#07523 רָצַח) and it can mean “kill” or “slay,” either on purpose or accidentally. *Ratsach,* like many other words, has a wide semantic range, and thus its meaning in a particular verse must be determined from both the immediate and remoter contexts. Thankfully, the Bible has a lot to say about murder, manslaughter, the execution of criminals, and killing in war, and it is easy to tell by studying all the verses on the subject that the Sixth Commandment means not to take a life *unjustly.* In this context, *ratsach* should be translated “murder,” and it is in most modern versions (cf. CJB, HCSB, ESV, NASB, NET, NIV, NKJV, Rotherham, YLT).

Thankfully, most Bible commentators are not confused by the sixth commandment even when it is translated as “You shall not kill.” Maxie Dunnam wrote about the Sixth Commandment, “According to Genesis 9:6, this commandment did not prohibit the death penalty. It is obvious in the Old Testament that this [Sixth Commandment] was not a prohibition against all killing, only unauthorized killing.”[[34]](#footnote-30705)

Since killing in criminal execution, in self-defense, and in war are condoned in Scripture, it is hard to see how “You shall not kill” is an acceptable translation of *ratsach* in the Sixth Commandment. There is no question that the average reader gets the wrong idea from “you shall not kill,” and instead of correctly concluding that accidental killing and suicide are being included with murder, the modern reader wrongly concludes that self-defense, the execution of criminals, and killing in war are forbidden by God.

[For information on murder, manslaughter, and the death penalty for murder, see commentary on Exod. 21:12. Other verses that speak about murder and manslaughter include Exod. 20:13; 21:12, 28-30; Deut. 5:17; and Num. 35:9-34.]

Exd 20:14

**“Do not commit adultery.”** This is the seventh of the Ten Commandments.

Exd 20:15

**“Do not steal.”** This is the eighth of the Ten Commandments (cf. Deut. 5:19; Lev. 19:11).

Exd 20:16

**“Do not give false testimony against your neighbor.”** This is the ninth of the Ten Commandments (cf. Deut. 5:20). For more on giving false testimony, see Exodus 23:1-3. If a person is a false witness, that person is to receive the punishment that the accused person would have received if the false witness had not been discovered (Deut. 19:16-21).

Exd 20:17

**“Do not covet​.”** This is the tenth and last of the Ten Commandments. There is nothing wrong with desiring to have something one does not have, or desiring to better one’s life. But in this context, “coveting” is desiring to have something that you have no right to. The examples given refer to things that already belong to your neighbor.

Exd 20:18

**“All the people saw the thunderings, the lightnings, the sound.”** The people also heard the sound of God’s voice as He loudly spoke the Ten Commandments from the top of Mount Sinai. It is commonly taught that the first time Israel got the Ten Commandments was when Moses came down Mount Sinai with them, but that is not correct. The first time Israel got the Ten Commandments was when God personally spoke them in a loud voice from Mount Sinai to the people of Israel at the foot of the mountain. The Bible says in a number of places that the children of Israel heard the Ten Commandments spoken by God (cf. Exod. 20:22; Deut. 4:10-13, 15, 36; 5:4-6, 22-27; 18:16; Heb. 12:18-21). Then, after that, on his fifth time up Mount Sinai, Moses was given the Ten Commandments on stone tablets—but Moses broke those first tablets (Exod. 24:15-18; 31:18; 32:19). Then, on his seventh and last time up Mount Sinai, Moses got a second set of stone tablets (Exod. 34:1-4; cf. Deut. 9:10-11, 15-17; 10:1-5).

God spoke the Ten Commandments in a loud voice to the Israelites between Moses’ third and fourth time up Mount Sinai, and at that time Moses was down at the base of Mount Sinai with the people. The voice of God frightened the Israelites, so they asked that God not speak directly to them anymore, but that He would speak to Moses and Moses then could tell them what He said (Exod. 20:19-21). So it was that the rest of the Law of Moses was given by God to Moses who then told the people.

Exodus 20:18 is an example of the figure of speech zeugma, which occurs when there is a verb before nouns that don’t all match the verb. The people could “see” the lightning, but they could not see the thunder or the sound of the shofar.[[35]](#footnote-18365) E. W. Bullinger comments, “And by the omission of the second verb, ‘heard,’ we are informed that the people were impressed by what they saw, rather than what they heard.”[[36]](#footnote-28336)

[For more on God giving the Ten Commandments in a loud voice, see commentary on Exod. 19:9. For more on God coming in the form of a human so he could directly relate to people, see commentary on Acts 7:55.]

**“shofar.”** The ram’s horn trumpet, not the metal trumpet.

**“they moved *back* and stood at a distance.”** The Hebrew word translated as “moved” is *nua* (#05128 נוּעַ) and in this context it refers to moving around, specifically moving back, away from Yahweh. The people who had earlier gone close to Yahweh (Exod. 19:17) now “moved” back and stood further away from Him. The KJV gets the sense: “when the people saw it, they removed, and stood afar off.” The NAB reads that the people “took up a position farther away.” The JPS reads, “when the people saw it, they fell back and stood at a distance.” Although many English Bibles read that the people “trembled,” the meaning here is not “trembled,” but “moved away.” The Hebrew text has a different word for the people “trembling” in Exodus 19:16.

Exd 20:19

**“They said to Moses.”** The people did not come as a mass to Moses, they were represented by their leaders, as Deuteronomy 5:23 makes clear. Many times in Scripture, “the people” or “Israel” is said to do something but it is the leaders who actually act, representing the people.

**“do not have God speak.”** The people knew Moses was speaking with God, so they told him not to have God speak to them. Some English versions read, “do not let God speak to us,” but Moses did not have the authority to “let” or not let God speak, so “have” is the better translation.

Exd 20:20

**“upon you.”** The Hebrew is more literally, “upon your faces.”[[37]](#footnote-28259) The meaning is that the fear of Yahweh will be constantly present with the people.

Exd 20:21

**“and Moses drew near to the thick-darkness where God was.”** This is Moses’ fourth time up Mount Sinai. God had spoken the Ten Commandments directly to Israel from the top of Mount Sinai after Moses went down for the third time (Exod. 19:25). God’s loud voice, combined with the dark cloud, fire, thunder, and shofar blast, had frightened the Israelites and they asked that God not speak to them again (Exod. 20:1, 18-19; cf. Deut. 5:22-27). So Moses went back up to God and got more laws for Israel to live by (Exod. 21-23). Those initial laws were called “The Book of the Covenant” (Exod. 24:7), and they, along with the Ten Commandments, were the laws that Israel agreed to obey when they made the Old Covenant, which many today call the “Old Testament” (cf. Exod. 24:3-8). The New Covenant was ratified when Christ died on the cross.

**“thick-darkness.”** This is one word in Hebrew. Interestingly, the Hebrew word is used in “dark” times, that is, dangerous times. Thus, there is likely an overtone of danger when approaching the cloud that surrounded Yahweh. At this point, Moses only drew close to the cloud that surrounded God, he did not go into it.

[For more on Moses’ seven trips up Mount Sinai, see commentary on Exod. 19:3.]

Exd 20:23

**“Do not make gods of silver to be with me, and do not make for yourselves gods of gold.”** The Masoretic text puts the pause in the sentence “Do not make with me. Gods of silver and gods of gold you shall not make for yourselves.” This pointing was to emphasize that no idol was to be made to be with God, then avoiding the misconception that as long as you did not make an idol god out of silver or gold that was okay. However, that vowel pointing (in this case determining punctuation) makes the text seem awkward.

Exd 20:24

**“Make an altar of earth.”** This could be understood as dirt because the next verse mentions stone. Or, this could be inclusive of dirt and stones, with Exodus 20:25 specifying stones, which was the most common altar material. Building an altar of dirt would have been much harder in those days than it is now because good sturdy shovels were not common, whereas picking up stones and building an altar with them and some dirt to stabilize the altar would have been much easier.

Exd 20:25

**“If you make me an altar of stone, you must not build it of cut stones.”** Any altar built for Yahweh was to be made of plain, unshaped fieldstone, stones that He created. It was not to be beautified in any way. An altar was not to be something of beauty that people admired in any way. The Hebrew word for altar is related to “slaughter,” and is more properly a “slaughter site.” An altar was only necessary because human sin separated humankind from God, so killing an animal was one of the few acceptable ways to approach him (see commentary on Lev. 1:2), and killing an animal was not to be glorified in any way. It was a bloody but necessary atonement for sin.

No one went to the effort of building an altar but then not killing an animal and burning it on the altar. So altars were bloody, stinky places that required a lot of work. Even just gathering the wood necessary to burn an animal to ashes was a lot of work, and that was one of the reasons the Bible speaks of “serving” God and the pagan gods. It was a lot of work to “serve” God or the pagan gods and keep their worship going. There was the killing, skinning, and butchering of the sacrifice, getting water to wash it and the men who killed the sacrifice and now had blood on them, gathering the wood used to burn the sacrifice to ashes, carrying the ashes to a designated place, etc.

Exd 20:26

**“so that your nakedness is not exposed on it.”** God commanded that altars built for His sacrifices and offerings had ramps, not steps, that went up to the top of the altar. This was so that as the men walked up to the top of the altar their clothes did not expose their “nakedness.” Exodus 28:42 spoke about the length of the robes the priests were to wear when in the Tabernacle serving God: “You are to make them [the priests] linen undergarments to cover the flesh of their nakedness. They must reach from the waist even to the thighs.”

The modesty required of Jewish priests is in contrast to the situation in many pagan religions. Nahum Sarna writes: “The altar must be so designed as to permit access to it with suitable propriety. This contrasts with many scenes in ancient Near Eastern art that feature priests officiating in the nude. Ritual nudity is a phenomenon known to many religions. It is symbolically associated with both death and rebirth, and it also has a variety of magical uses.”[[38]](#footnote-22784)

**Exodus Chapter 21**

Exd 21:1

**“Now these are the ordinances that you are to set before them.”** The Hebrew word translated as “ordinances” in the REV is mishpat (#04941, מִשְׁפָּט) and generally refers to more specific laws or rules than the word *torah* refers to, and these rules are part of the torah, the “Instruction.”

In the first five books of the Bible, the “Torah,” God sets forth “instuctions” about how to live a godly life and how to have a godly society. Traditionally, *torah* (#08451 תֹּרָה *torah* or תּוֹרָה *towrah*) is translated “law,” but that translation is easily misunderstood because *torah* means much more than just “law,” in the sense of legal codes to obey. On a basic level, it means guidance or instruction, but it also has meanings that include doctrine, custom, theory, etc. If we were to choose just one English word as a translation of “Torah,” then “Instruction” would likely be the best choice; that would certainly be better than “Law.” “The Torah” is a whole set of examples, historical records, moral and legal regulations, customs, and the acts of God, which people are to use as the basis of their society and to develop sound thinking. The Torah gives guidance and some specific regulations for people to obey and use as examples in their lives. A person who studies the Torah learns how to think like God thinks, gains wisdom and insight, learns how to deal with life in order to be godly, learns the importance of godly families, and learns the basics of how to live in and govern a godly society.

One of the advantages of thinking about the torah as “instruction” and not “law” is that society, customs, and situations change over time, and sometimes drastically. So, godly laws must change to remain just, fair, and godly. Thus, for example, the Torah has examples of problems caused by accidents and unruly animals, but has no examples of problems caused by automobiles or hazardous waste. Nevertheless, we can use the logic that governs the examples in the Torah to build laws and regulations that govern our modern society. To learn how to think about life the way God thinks about life, it is important to study Torah.

Exd 21:2

**“If you buy a Hebrew slave.”** Many Israelite slaves became slaves by selling themselves or their children into slavery to pay off a debt. It is interesting that after the Ten Commandments, the first major topic God covered was slavery. One of the reasons for that may have been that the Israelites had just been slaves in Egypt and so understood from experience that slavery was to be handled in a humane and godly way. In God’s sight, the slave was still a human being and had rights.

**“in the seventh he is to go out free.”** “Slavery” under the Mosaic Law among Jews was completely different from the slavery in the other ancient countries and the slavery in more modern times, such as the slavery of black people in America. The difference is ownership. In slavery among Israelites, according to the Mosaic Law, the master of the slave did not own the slave. God owned the people—all the people no matter what their circumstances were. If it happened that an Israelite man fell into bad circumstances or was a criminal and fell into slavery, he served six years and was released in the seventh. Furthermore, when the slave was released, the master had to give the former slave supplies that would allow him to get started again in life. Since a significant percentage of people had fallen into slavery to pay a debt, or were criminals because they were poor, if they were released with no supplies to start over with, they would end up back in slavery very soon. So in His love and mercy, in Deuteronomy 15:14 God commands the slave master, “you are to supply, yes, supply him from your flock and from your threshing floor and from your winepress; as Yahweh your God has blessed you, you are to give to him” (cf. Deut. 15:12-15). The figure polyptoton—“supply, yes, supply”—emphasizes that the master is to liberally supply the freed slave with the things he needs to get a fresh start.

It should also be remembered that, with the general exception of the kings of Israel, who came hundreds of years after this, there was no police force and no jails. So people who speak disparagingly of God’s slavery system have a modern slavery system of their own: prison. A person in prison is a kind of slave. They are told what to wear, what to eat, where to go, and when to go there, and they are not “free” to do much on their own at all. And our modern prison slavery is not for six years, often it is for much more and sometimes it is for life. Furthermore, when people are released from prison, they are not supplied with enough goods to get a good new start in life, and many of them are back in jail very quickly. So God’s slavery system is much more godly and merciful than our modern system, yet because we don’t refer to our prisoners as slaves, even though in fact that’s basically what they are, we think the ancient Jews were barbaric, but we are not. Perhaps looking down from heaven, God thinks we are barbaric and He is not.

Also, a master could not kill a slave, and if he did, the master was punished, ostensibly by the local Levites and elders who were charged with enforcing the Law (Exod. 21:20). And if a master hit a slave and caused him to lose an eye or a tooth the slave was to be set free (Exod. 21:26-27). In contrast, in today’s prison/slave system, if a prison slave is wounded in jail, he or she is not set free but has to remain in that dangerous environment. We have created this modern prison problem because we refuse to completely obey God’s justice system, which commanded capital punishment for society’s egregious criminals and corporal punishment and temporary slavery for lesser criminals. While it would be almost impossible to return to God’s justice system today, nevertheless, we should not speak disparagingly of it because it is from God and therefore certainly better than what humankind has constructed today, which is cruel and a failure in many ways.

Also, if a slave ran away, the people he hid out with were not to return him to his master (Deut. 23:15-16). This law more or less ensured that slaves were, in general, treated quite well, because Israel was small and foreign countries, or the other end of the country, were not far away.

On the other hand, being a slave came with a risk. Slaves did not have all the rights that free people had. So, for example, if a slave’s tooth was knocked out by the master, the slave went free but the master was not punished (Exod. 21:27). In the law it was considered punishment enough that the master had bought the slave and now the slave went free.

**“in the seventh.”** The Mosaic Law is unclear about the exact time the slave is released. Exodus 21:2 says, “in the seventh year” (cf. Deut. 15:12). But Jeremiah 34:14 says that the slaves are to be released at the end of the seventh year. There have been several attempts to explain the difference, but none completely satisfactorily. It is quite possible that in the more than 800 years between Moses and Jeremiah, the slave owners kept releasing the slaves later and later “in the seventh year” until by Jeremiah’s time, the phrase “in the seventh year” was interpreted to mean at the end of the seventh year. It would not be beyond the greedy slave masters to interpret the Law in their favor like that.

Exd 21:3

**“if he is married.”** That is, if he was married when he became a slave and both he and his wife became slaves together, then in the seventh year they go out together.

Exd 21:4

**“the wife and her children will be her master’s, and he must go out by himself.”** This may seem harsh at first, but it actually reflects the heart of the Law, which is personal responsibility. When an Israelite became a slave, which was usually due to debt or criminal activity, he knew he would be freed after six years of service (see commentary on Exod. 21:2). He would also understand that if the master provided him with a wife he would have to leave her with the master at the end of the six years. So it was up to the slave what he would choose. We don’t think that our modern laws are harsh if we sentence an unmarried man or woman to ten years in prison during which time they cannot freely date or be in circumstances where they can find a mate, so why would we consider this Mosaic law harsh? The man can wait six years if he decides to. Jacob served Laban for seven years for his first wife and then seven more for his second, and while we don’t generally consider Jacob’s service years as slavery, he worked more or less as hard as any Israelite slave would.

Our modern society is one in which a considerable portion of the people don’t take personal responsibility for any of their choices or the consequences of those choices, but that is not the Mosaic Law. God, through His law, tries to teach and enforce that people make good decisions and take responsibility for the decisions they make.

**“master.”** Both times in this verse “master” is a grammatical plural, literally, “masters.” This is a plural of emphasis, an honorific plural.

Exd 21:5

**“says, yes, says.”** The Hebrew text is made emphatic by the figure of speech polyptoton. In polyptoton, the verb is repeated twice but in different forms. Here in Exodus 21:5, the text repeats the verb “says,” such that the text reads more literally, “says says,” with the first verb being an infinitive verb and the second being an imperfect verb. In *The Schocken Bible*, this double “says” is translated as “says, yes, says.”

The figure of speech polyptoton is in the text for emphasis, and thus in Exodus 21-23 there is a great emphasis on the different points of Law. In Exodus chapter 21, there are ten polyptotons; in chapter 22, there are thirteen; and in chapter 23, there are five—making a total of twenty-eight polyptotons in these three chapters of law. In contrast, in the next three chapters, Exodus 24-26, there is not a single polyptoton.

The emphasis here in Exodus 21:5 is that the servant emphatically says that he does not want to go out free. At that point, the servant can make a request to stay with the master if his master agrees.

[See commentary on Gen. 2:16 and the Word Study: “Polyptoton.”]

Exd 21:6

**“master.”** Two times in the verse, the word “master” is literally “masters,” a grammatical plural, a plural of emphasis.

**“the judges.”** The word “judges” is translated from the Hebrew word *elohim* (#0430 אֱלֹהִים). Elohim is a plural noun in its grammatical form. Elohim does not have a singular form, it is always grammatically plural, and as such Elohim can mean “God,” a “god,” “gods,” or a representative or representatives of God such as a judge or judges (see commentary on Gen. 1:1). The context reveals which meaning is meant in the biblical text, and almost always that is an easy choice. However, in some cases, which meaning is intended can be more difficult to determine. In this case, the logical choice seems to be that “*elohim*” refers to the local judges. They were the representatives of God, and the place where the slave would go to get his ear pierced, especially during the wilderness wanderings, would be the Tabernacle. During the period of the wilderness wanderings, it would be easy for someone to go to the Tent of Meeting where God was. But if this regulation was also intended to be in force once Israel got settled in the Promised Land, which seems to be the case since this law was not changed later, then it would not be convenient for a slave and master to travel to Jerusalem for this ceremony and so they would likely go to the nearest Levitical city where Levites and judges who represented God lived. Also, although the “door” or “doorpost” is not specifically indicated here, it would likely have been a post in the Tabernacle during the wilderness wanderings, and after that, it could be a door in the location where the judges lived.

That *elohim* in this verse refers to “judges,” the representatives of God, and not “God” Himself, is supported by Exodus 22:9 by the phrase, “he whom the judges condemn.” In that phrase, the word *elohim* (judges) is followed by the verb “condemn,” which in the Hebrew text is a plural verb. When *elohim* is being used for “God,” the one true God, the verb associated with it is singular. That in this case “condemn” is plural supports the meaning “judges,” the representatives of God, in this section of the Law of Moses.

Another reason that *elohim* refers to the judges is that in the context of Exodus 22:8-9, things that were given to a person for safekeeping, or that were lost and later disputed, needed impartial judges to hear each person’s case and make a decision. If a person would steal from a neighbor, then he would also lie about it, so saying that the people involved would take an oath before God and that would be sufficient was not an acceptable solution. In contrast, local judges usually knew the character of the people involved and also might have known if someone suddenly and inexplicably gained property, livestock, or money. Godly local judges were often the best solution for solving problems in a community.

**“and he will serve him “forever.”** The word “forever” in this case means for a long time because according to Jewish law and rabbinic interpretation, the servitude ended in the year of the Jubilee (Lev. 25:39-41) or when the master died.

Exd 21:7

**“she is not to go out *free* as the male slaves do.”** Men who were sold into slavery were released in the seventh year (see commentary on Exod. 21:2). However, women who were sold into slavery were not released. It was the cultural norm that the master or someone in the master’s family would marry the girl (Exod. 21:8), and she would become a permanent part of that family.

Exd 21:8

**“If she is unpleasant in the eyes of her master.”** The Bible does not give a reason why the woman would be “unpleasant” (the literal Hebrew is “bad” or “evil”) in the eyes of her master. There could be many things he was displeased with. In any case, he designated her for himself when he bought her, and now that he is no longer interested in her he must allow her to be bought back by her family or by another Israelite.

**“master.”** The Hebrew is a grammatical plural, “masters.” It is a plural of majesty or emphasis.

**“who has designated her to himself.”** The NET text note on Exodus 21:8 reads: “The verb יָעַד (*yaʿad*) does not mean ‘betroth, espouse’ as some of the earlier translations had it, but ‘to designate.’ When he bought the girl, he designated her for himself, giving her and her family certain expectations.”

The girl may have been “designated” because she was still very young, or the master was planning to marry another woman (Exod. 21:10), or there may have been other reasons the master did not marry the girl from the start.

**“then he must let her be redeemed.”** If the master married a girl who was sold into slavery, but she did not please him, then the master was to let her birth family buy her back. He could not sell an Israelite girl to a non-Israelite, a foreigner. However, what usually happened was the master would simply take another wife along with the unloved wife (concubine), but since wives cost money and time, he might simply sell the unloved woman back to her family.

Exd 21:9

**“rights of daughters.”** In this context, “daughters” refers broadly to women, because every woman was someone’s daughter. In the culture and according to the law of Moses, women had rights in the marriage. We see some of those rights in the next verse, Exodus 21:10.

Exd 21:10

**“food.”** The Hebrew word is *sheʾer* (#07607 שְׁאֵר), which means “flesh, meat.” The point that the Law is making is that the wife, even if loved less than another wife, is to be well-fed. She is to get meat just like the other wife and eat what the rest of the family eats; she is not to just be given vegetables and leftovers. The Mosaic Law was very clear that a husband was to take good care of his wife—every wife he had.

**“clothing.”** In this context, “clothing” also included housing whenever possible. Truly poor people often had to sleep outdoors in their clothing (Exod. 22:25-26), which then were both their clothing and their shelter. In this context of a man providing for his unwanted wife, he could not just give her clothing but not shelter if he could afford it—that would never be God’s heart in providing for the woman—so “clothing” here includes clothing and a sheltered place to sleep at night.

**“conjugal rights.”** The Hebrew word is *`onah* (#05772 עוֹנָה) and it occurs only here in the Old Testament, which has generated some scholarly debate about its meaning. However, from ancient times it has been understood to mean the sexual intercourse that occurs in marriage and was considered a wife’s right, and there is no solid lexical or logical reason to doubt that conclusion. Sexual intercourse with her husband was the only way a woman could have children, and children were absolutely necessary for a blessed life in the biblical world. The only reliable plan for old age and for protection in the biblical world was to have a large family (Ps. 127:4-5). This was so much the case that a barren woman was considered cursed.

Children were extremely important to women in the biblical world and the ancient world in general. Abraham’s wife Sarah was so upset about being barren that she told Abraham to have intercourse with her slave girl so she could have children through her (Gen. 16:2). When Jacob’s wife Rachel was barren she expressed her feelings to Jacob and said, “Give me children or else I will die” (Gen. 30:1). When Naomi’s husband and two sons died, she told the people not to call her Naomi (“Pleasant”) but to call her “Mara” (“Bitter”). When Samuel’s mother Hannah was barren before giving birth to Samuel, she refused to eat, wept, was bitter in her soul about it, and her husband’s second wife provoked her about it (1 Sam. 1:2-10). Part of the blessings pronounced upon Israel if they would obey God and His law was that no one would be barren (Deut. 7:14). One of the great reasons for praising God was that He makes barren women become “the joyful mother of children” (Ps. 113:9). As we see in Exodus 21:11, if a husband refused to have sexual intercourse with a wife, God allowed her to leave him.

In the ancient world, death was often quick and unexpected. A woman with lots of children (and a husband if a wife died) could pretty much expect to be taken care of in her old age if her husband died, and security in one’s old age and protection from thieves and bullies were important reasons to have lots of children. There was no police force or 911 numbers in the ancient world—a large family was one’s best protection against many societal ills.

Exd 21:11

**“she can go free, without paying any money.”** Exodus 21:10-11 is very important for a proper understanding of marriage, marriage duties, and divorce. It is often taught in Christian circles that the only reason for divorce is adultery, and that opinion is based on verses such as Matthew 19:3-9. But there has been a lot of work done on the cultural debate about marriage at the time of Christ, and many competent scholars have shown that the debate about divorce was between competing rabbinic schools and involved a disagreement over the reasons that a man could divorce a woman (Matt. 19:3). Jesus addressed that to a point, but also said that he had not come to destroy the law but to fulfill it (Matt. 5:17-18).

Jesus never addressed all the conditions under which a woman could leave a man, and there is no reason to assume that he changed the Mosaic Law of Exodus 21:10-11 on that point. Many Christians today feel trapped in their marriage because even though their spouse is mentally or physically abusive, or does not provide for them, or their marriage is loveless and sexless, because the spouse has not committed adultery the abused one does not feel free to leave. Marriage is a covenant made in good faith that both partners will fulfill their proper roles, and if that does not happen the covenant is broken, just as Israel broke their covenant with God. Adultery is not the lone “key” to a door leading out of marriage, as we see here in Exodus. God gave divorce as a way out of an abusive marriage because humans sometimes sin horribly against each other.

Was divorce God’s intention for unhappy marriages? Certainly not. God desires change and reconciliation, which is why He pleaded over and over with Israel to change her ways. Furthermore, there is no verse in the Bible that says a couple has to divorce. Many seemingly unredeemable marriages are saved by counseling, forbearance, and forgiveness. Nevertheless, sometimes divorce is the most redemptive way out of a terrible relationship, and even God eventually divorced Israel because of her sin, hard-heartedness, and worship of other gods (Isa. 50:1; Jer. 3:8), and Jesus was certainly not condemning his heavenly father for that. God hates divorce (Mal. 2:16), but hardness of heart gets involved between people (Matt. 19:8), and there are times when divorce can be a viable choice, just as it was for God Himself.

It should be said that although God allowed for a woman to leave a man for abuse and non-support, in actual practice it apparently must have been very uncommon for a woman to be able to leave. As often happens with biblical law, God’s law is righteous but people do not obey it. Women in the biblical world often had little or no control over their lives. Thankfully, that has changed in many parts of the modern world.

When the text says that the woman, “may go free, without paying any money,” it refers to the fact that she came into the marriage as a slave, so it is likely that she or her family owed money and she was the payment or part of the payment. She had been sold to her master (Exod. 21:7), so theoretically then, she should have had to pay her master for her release. But this situation is actually different because the master married her, so now the situation is not about a slave buying her freedom, but rather a wife getting to leave an unworkable marriage because her husband is denying her food, clothing (and shelter, because often one’s clothes were their shelter) and sex. If the husband denies his wife these things, from God’s perspective she is free to leave.

Exd 21:12

**“must be put to death, yes, death.”** The world today has a tremendous amount of evil and unjust killing, kidnapping, rape, and more. The world would be a better place if the people committing heinous crimes in society were stopped, but how is that to be done? One of the biblical solutions to violent crimes is the death penalty. The Bible supports the death penalty in both the Old and New Testaments. In fact, according to Scripture, the death penalty is perhaps the most important key to having a fair and just legal system and a safe society. The death penalty was not invented by humans to solve a social problem. It was God who commanded the death penalty so that men, women, and children could live better and safer lives.

It is common to hear people say that the death penalty is demeaning to human life, but the opposite is the case. The death penalty actually affirms the value of life. It is demeaning to human life when someone who murders another person then “pays” for their crime with a penalty less than the death sentence. The message sent by giving a light sentence to a murderer is that a human life is not worth much, something that most criminals believe already. The death penalty sends the clear message that life is very valuable and if a person takes the life of another, the only viable compensation is the criminal’s own life.

The death penalty is an integral part of the Old Testament Law and is in all five books of Moses (Genesis-Deuteronomy), and in other books of the Old Testament as well. Furthermore, the New Testament supports it. The most common reason why people believe the Bible does not support the death penalty is that the King James Version and a few other English versions of the Bible translate the Sixth Commandment as “Thou shalt not kill” (Exod. 20:13; Deut. 5:17). But the Hebrew word translated “kill” in those English versions is better translated “murder,” which is the way it is translated in almost all modern English versions of the Bible. The Sixth Commandment is not forbidding the death penalty; it is a command not to murder or kill another man unjustly.

The death penalty is so integral to a safe society and establishing the value of human life that it is mentioned many times in the Law of Moses (cf. Exod. 21:12-14, 16, 28-29; Lev. 24:17, 21; Num. 35:16-21, 31; Deut. 19:11-13, 16-21; 24:7). Besides those doctrinal statements about putting criminals who commit capital crimes to death, many of the great leaders in the Bible put criminals to death. In Leviticus 24:10-23, Moses oversaw the execution of a man who had blasphemed. In Numbers 15:32-36, a man was executed for violating the Sabbath. In Exodus 32:25-29 and Numbers 25:1-15, people were executed for idolatry. Joshua executed Achan, who selfishly stole goods from Jericho and caused the death of about 36 people (Josh. 7:1, 5, 11, 12, 19-26). Samuel executed Agag, the Amalekite king, for “making women childless” (1 Sam. 15:33). David executed Rechab and Baanah for murdering Ish-bosheth (2 Sam. 4:5-12). Solomon, often called the wisest man who ever lived, had his brother executed for trying to steal the kingdom from him (1 Kings 2:25), and had Joab executed (1 Kings 2:29), and had Shimei executed for breaking the law (1 Kings 2:46). So great men of God like Moses, Joshua, David, and Solomon did not think that the death penalty was ungodly or inappropriate for capital crimes.

The New Testament also supports the death penalty. 1 Timothy 1:8-10 says that the law is good if a person uses it properly, such as for murders. When something is clearly established in the Old Testament as the will of God, it does not need to be repeated in the New Testament so we will know that it is still the will of God. When God wants to change something, like His laws concerning animal sacrifice or circumcision, He tells us. The proper way to interpret Scripture is to believe that God’s will is constant unless He tells us He has new rules for us. In the case of capital punishment for murderers, kidnappers, etc., God does not change His mind about those things, but instead, He confirms what He had said in the Old Testament (cf. 1 Tim. 1:8-10; see also Rom. 7:12). That is why when Paul was accused of causing riots, he said that if it could be proven he did those things he did not refuse to die (Acts 25:11).

There are some verses of Scripture that people have used to try to say that the death penalty is wrong, such as “Judge not lest you be judged” (Matt. 7:1) or the idea of “turn the other cheek” (Matt. 5:39) but those verses have not been correctly understood or rightly applied to the death penalty. Similarly, people have said the death penalty is not loving, but God is love and He gave the death penalty commands, so they reflect His love by keeping people free from fear and safe from harm.

Many people say the death penalty is harsh, but James Jordan comments on that: “Perhaps to our modern ears they may seem harsh, but we must *be careful not to accuse God of sin.* He gave these laws, and regardless of whether or not we should keep them today, surely they reflect His goodness. Doesn’t this harshness serve to show us that we have too lax a view of sin? Also, have our modern loose laws done us any good? Modern humanistic law is soft on the criminals and harsh on the innocent. Biblical law is harsh on criminals and thus protects the innocent, the widow, the orphan, the poor, and the law-abiding.”[[39]](#footnote-15621)

Also, there are people who say we should not have a death penalty because so many witnesses lie in court. That may be true today, but that is because we fail to do what God says. The Bible says that if a person is caught lying in court, they are to get the punishment that the person they lied about would have gotten if their lie had not been discovered (Deut. 19:16-19). We don’t follow that guidance today. If a person gets caught in perjury, usually all that happens is a relative slap on the wrist in comparison to the punishment they intended the other person to get. The result of that lax kind of justice is predictable: a lot of people lie in court. If we would actually obey what God says to do, there would be hardly any perjury in court.

In the future, when Jesus Christ sets up his kingdom on earth, there will be natural people there who still have a sin nature and would sin if left to themselves, just as people do today. How will Jesus Christ keep order in his kingdom? He will rule with a “rod of iron” (Ps. 2:9; Rev. 2:27; 12:5; 19:15). Jesus’ rod of iron will ensure that the people in his kingdom will be safe and be able to live without fear. We could have a much more pleasant life on this earth today if we would deal with capital criminals the way the Bible says to and the way that Jesus will in the future.

Jesus himself affirms the value of the death penalty for unrepentant evil people. When he comes to earth he will kill the wicked people so they will not enter his wonderful kingdom on earth. Isaiah 11:4 says that when he comes, “with the spirit from his lips he will kill the wicked” (cf. Isa. 63:2-4; Matt. 25:31-46). Eventually, God will put to death all the wicked people because of the harm they have done and also so they will not harm other people (Rev. 20:11-15).

[For information on murder, manslaughter, and the death penalty, see commentary on Exod. 21:12. For more on the death penalty being love, see commentary on Zech. 5:3. When he comes, Jesus will kill the wicked (Isa. 11:4). For more on Jesus’ future reign on earth, see Appendix 5: “Christ’s Future Kingdom on Earth.”]

**“put to death, yes, death.”** God emphasizes that the criminal must be put to death by repeating the verb that gets translated “put to death” twice. Thus, a somewhat more literal rendition of the verse might be “Anyone who strikes a person so that he dies must die, be caused to die. Repeating the verb twice with different inflections for emphasis is the figure of speech polyptoton, and the reader should not miss that God is emphasizing the fact that murderers must be put to death.

[For more on polyptoton and the way it is translated in the REV, see commentary on Gen. 2:16.]

Exd 21:13

**“But if it was not premeditated.”** In this case, the aggressor did strike the man, but he did not mean to kill him. This is a case of manslaughter, in which the aggressor is guilty but not of premeditated murder, which is punishable by death. The place where the killer can flee is a city of refuge (Num. 35:9-15). The killer had to remain in that city until the death of the High Priest (Num. 35:25-32).

**“then I will appoint you a place where he can flee.”** Moses could not yet appoint a place where the person who killed someone accidentally could flee because the Promised Land, Canaan, was not yet conquered. After Joshua conquered the land of Canaan, then he appointed “cities of refuge” (Josh. 20:1-9). The cities were: Kadesh in the tribal territory of Naphthali, Shechem in the tribal territory of Ephraim, Hebron in the tribal territory of Judah, Bezer in the tribal territory of Reuben, Ramoth in Gilead in the tribal territory of Gad, and Golan in Bashan in the tribal territiroy of the eastern part of Manasseh.

Exd 21:14

**“to be put to death.”** The Hebrew text is more literally, “to die,” but that phrase alone could be confusing to the English reader and might be thought to mean that a person taken from God’s altar would die on their own. That is not the meaning. The altar of God was ordinarily a place of refuge, but if a person was a cold-blooded murderer, God provided no protection for him.

Exd 21:15

**“put to death, yes, death.”** The English phrase “put to death” is the translation of one verb in the Hebrew text and that verb is repeated twice. The first verb is an infinitive verb and the second verb is an imperfect verb. Repeating the verb twice in succession is the figure of speech polyptoton and it is used for emphasis, in this case highlighting both the seriousness of the sin and the penalty for it. The Hebrew text is more literally translated as “put to death, yes, put to death,” and it occurs quite a few times in the Bible, always emphasizing the enormity of the crime and the punishment for it.

[For more on polyptoton and the way it is translated in the REV, see commentary on Gen. 2:16, “eat, yes, eat.” Also, see the Word Study: “Polyptoton.”]

Exd 21:16

**“and sells him, or if he is found in his hand.”** Although the verse is put in the masculine, the law applies equally to women. Anyone who kidnapped a man or woman, boy or girl, was to be put to death.

If the modern world would apply this law of God today the world would see a drastic drop in the sex trade. The world is not serious enough about protecting victims, instead, we are overly concerned about treating criminals “fairly” (see commentary and quotation by James Jordan in the commentary on Exod. 21:12).

Exd 21:17

**“treats his father or his mother with contempt.”** The Hebrew word translated as “treats...with contempt” is *qalal* (#07043 קָלַל ), which means more like “to treat someone lightly,” or “treat someone with contempt,” although it can certainly refer to cursing someone. However, the more common word that means “curse” is *ʾarar* (#0779 אָרַר), which is not used here. The word *qalal* opens the door to more meanings and a wider range of insults and contempt than just the word “curse” does. English versions that do not read “curse” include the JPS (“insults his father or mother”), the LSV, YLT (“he who is reviling his father or mother”), the NET (“he who treats his father or mother disgracefully”), and the NLT (“anyone who dishonors father or mother”). The two words, *qalal* and *ʾarar* are both used in Genesis 12:3 and the difference in the words shows up quite clearly there (see commentary on Gen. 12:3).

Exodus 21:17 is very similar to Leviticus 20:9. Also, Exodus 21:17 is quoted in Matthew 15:4b and Mark 7:10, but the New Testament quotation follows the Septuagint more closely than it does the Hebrew text of Exodus.

**“put to death, yes, death.”** The English phrase “put to death” is the translation of one verb in the Hebrew text and that verb is repeated twice. The first verb is an infinitive verb and the second verb is an imperfect verb. Repeating the verb twice in succession is the figure of speech polyptoton and it is used for emphasis, in this case highlighting both the seriousness of the sin and the penalty for it. The Hebrew text is more literally translated as “put to death, yes, put to death,” and it occurs quite a few times in the Bible, always emphasizing the enormity of the crime and the punishment for it.

[For more on polyptoton and the way it is translated in the REV, see commentary on Gen. 2:16, “eat, yes, eat.” Also, see the Word Study: “Polyptoton.”]

Exd 21:19

**“with his staff.”** To understand the purpose of this phrase, it is important to remember that almost every man walked with a staff. Judah had a staff he walked with (Gen. 38:18); Moses had a staff (Exod. 4:2); and when Jesus sent out the apostles 2 by 2, he told them to take their staff with them (Mark 6:8). So walking with a staff was normal; men walked with a staff. So Exodus 21:19 is not talking about walking with a staff like a crippled man walks with a cane, instead it is representing that the man who was struck is now healed and walking around like normal. The man who struck his neighbor is acquitted only when the person he struck is healed and back to normal.

**“healed, yes, healed.”** The phrase “healed, yes, healed” is the translation of the Hebrew text in which the verb “healed” is repeated twice. The first verb is an infinitive verb and the second verb is an imperfect verb. Repeating the verb twice in succession is the figure of speech polyptoton and it is used for emphasis, in this case emphasizing that the injured person was to be allowed to heal completely.

[For more on polyptoton and the way it is translated in the REV, see commentary on Gen. 2:16, “eat, yes, eat.” Also, see the Word Study: “Polyptoton.”]

Exd 21:20

**“with a staff”** Many men, perhaps even most men, carried a walking stick or staff. A man who lost his temper could easily strike a slave with it.

**“he must be avenged, yes, avenged.”** The text does not specify in Exodus 21:20 how the dead slave is to be avenged because the Law specifies that in other places. The Law said that if a man struck another man with an instrument of wood and he died, the aggressor was to be put to death (Exod. 21:12; Num. 35:18). That is the case here. A slave is a person with rights, including the right to life, and if someone takes that away, then God says they are to be put to death as well.

The phrase “avenged, yes, avenged” is the translation of the Hebrew text in which the verb “avenged” is repeated twice. The first verb is an infinitive verb and the second verb is an imperfect verb. Repeating the verb twice in succession is the figure of speech polyptoton and it is used for emphasis, in this case emphasizing that the person who was killed was to be avenged by the death of the killer.

[For more on polyptoton and the way it is translated in the REV, see commentary on Gen. 2:16, “eat, yes, eat.” Also, see the Word Study: “Polyptoton.”]

Exd 21:21

**“because the slave is his money.”** The Hebrew text is more literally, “because he is his money,” but that can be confusing in English. The REV and some other English versions replace the “he” with “the slave” for clarity. The word “money” is literally “silver,” but it is used regularly for money. The idea in Exodus 21:21 is that the slave made the master money or certainly helped with daily work, so it does not seem to make sense that the master willingly disabled him and should therefore be punished in some way. If the slave recovers after a day or two, the master is not punished at all. If the slave does not recover, then there is to be some kind of retribution.

Exd 21:22

**“If men fight and hurt a pregnant woman, such that her children come out.”** One of the sections in the Bible that has been used in the abortion debate is Exodus 21:22-23. Before we begin a discussion on the verses themselves and their implications, it is very important to note that these verses are not directly speaking about abortion. Having an abortion is a purposeful act, the woman or parents are purposely trying to kill the baby. Here in Exodus, however, if the verse is speaking of a miscarriage, it was unintentional; the man who hit or pushed the woman did so in the midst of a fight with another man, and any miscarriage or premature birth was unintentional. So this verse does not speak directly to the abortion debate.

A study of the subject of abortion in the Word of God reveals that there is not any particular verse that clearly mentions the subject. There is simply no verse that says, “Abortion is always wrong” or “Abortion is occasionally acceptable.” What we need to know about God’s view of abortion must be gained from inference and deduction within the overall context of Scripture. One thing that we can see from history and the Bible is that abortion was practiced to some extent in the ancient world, and if God had wanted to make a clear statement about it He certainly could have. It is likely that the primary reason there is not a clear statement about abortion in the Word of God is that the biblical culture was generally agricultural, and large families were desirable. Lots of children meant the family would be protected from enemies, would have lots of helpers on the farm, and would be able to provide for the parents as they got older. Our American society, which is not primarily agricultural, has many fewer children per family and some problems as a consequence. For example, it is all too common that elderly people are alone and have no one to help or take care of them. Historically, large families were insurance against that happening, so they were desirable.

Another thing we need to be aware of is that the Hebrew text is not clear in its meaning in Exodus 21:22, and so it needs to be understood from the context and remote context, and thus both sides of the abortion debate claim that this section of Scripture supports their position. The two sides of the debate are portrayed in the contrast between the Amplified Holy Bible (AMP) and the New International Version (NIV), and as one can see from the lists below, the scholars and versions are very divided on the issue, with many proponents on both sides—however, there are more proponents for the idea that the verse is speaking about a miscarriage. It is also worth noting that there are versions, such as the King James Version, that use neutral language that does not take a position on whether the baby is born alive or dead; they just point out that the baby is born. That neutral way of translating the verse is the way the REV has translated it.

**Exodus 21:22** (Amplified Bible; cf. BBE, CEB, CJB, JPS, NAB, NASB77, NEB, NET (Full-Notes), NJB, NRSV, REB, RSV, Rotherham, Schocken Bible, TNK): **“**If men contend with each other, and a pregnant woman [interfering] is hurt so that she **has a miscarriage**, yet no further damage follows, [the one who hurt her] shall surely be punished with a fine [paid] to the woman’s husband, as much as the judges determine.”

What the Amplified Bible calls a “miscarriage,” the New International Version calls a premature birth.

**Exodus 21:22** (NIV; cf. CSB, ESV, LSB, NASB2020, NET, NLT, TLV): “If men who are fighting hit a pregnant woman and she **gives birth prematurely** but there is no serious injury, the offender must be fined whatever the woman’s husband demands and the court allows.”

In the Amplified Bible and other versions that say the woman had a miscarriage, the phrase “there is no further damage” refers to the woman, the mother, who was hit in the fight. The baby is born dead but the mother ends up okay. In contrast, in the versions that translate the verse as a premature birth, the phrase “there is no serious injury” could refer to the mother or the baby. The evidence of Scripture seems to support that of the two choices, the choice that the text indicates a miscarriage seems to have the most evidence to support it.

A good reason to believe that Exodus 21:22 is speaking of a miscarriage is that if the child were born prematurely, but healthy, and the woman was also okay, there would be no reason for the fine that the verse says should be paid to the family. Today, we track pregnancies with a precise knowledge of when the baby will be born, and women who are only a couple months pregnant speak of their “due date” months away. However, this was not the case in the ancient world. For example, in *Goddesses, Whores, Wives, and Slaves*, the author, Sarah Pomeroy, notes that the exact period of gestation was not known in ancient times. Pomeroy writes, “Some Romans believed that children could be born seven to ten months after conception, but that eight-month babies were not possible.”[[40]](#footnote-15485) Without a knowledge of the due date, there would be no sure way to tell if the “birth” was premature unless the baby was obviously underdeveloped and therefore unhealthy, but if that were the case then harm to the baby in the form of death or sickness would soon follow. If the baby was healthy, there would be no concrete reason to connect the delivery with the fight and no reason for the fine to be levied. For the fine to be reasonable there must have been a definite connection between the fight and the birth, and some kind of damage done. It is because of facts like this that the translators of the many versions mentioned above believe that the woman in Exodus 21:22 had a miscarriage.

If it is accepted that Exodus 21:22 is speaking of a miscarriage, which seems most likely, an important fact emerges that factors in the abortion debate: the punishment that God demanded for causing this miscarriage was not the punishment that God demanded for either murder or manslaughter. God had declared the death penalty for murder (Exod. 21:12; Lev. 24:17, 21; Num. 35:16-21, 30, 31; Deut. 19:11-13; see commentary on Exod. 21:12) and the punishment for manslaughter was that the convicted person had to stay in a city of refuge until the death of the high priest (Exod. 21:13, Num. 35:22-25, 32). So it seems that God did not consider causing a miscarriage to be either murder or manslaughter. We today would likely put the miscarriage in the category of manslaughter because the death of the baby was accidental, but God apparently does not do that, instead, the perpetrator paid a fine.

The fact that the person who hit the woman and caused the miscarriage had to pay a fine is evidence that the ancient world understood that the baby had been alive but was killed, and they took the death of a baby seriously. The debate about when the life of a baby began was not a normal part of the ancient world. Babies grew and kicked and moved in the womb, and so to ancient people that was evidence of life. Furthermore, the fact that the Bible says God knew people in the womb (Jer. 1:5) and babies in the womb could apparently hear and act (Luke 1:44), is evidence the baby in the womb was quite alive.

It is noteworthy that the fine that the perpetrator had to pay was levied at the amount the husband demanded and the judges allowed. This is important because the fine for causing a miscarriage was not a fixed rate, like 100 shekels or something, but instead the fine varied. This makes sense on several levels. One factor to consider was how culpable was the woman. Was she more of an innocent bystander, or was she trying to enter the fight and help her husband win? Also, the circumstances of the family were likely considered. Was this a first child, or a possible first son? Although those things might not matter as much in today’s world, they mattered very much in the biblical culture.

It is evident that God did not consider causing the miscarriage either murder or manslaughter, because if He had, He would have prescribed the penalty for those crimes. Instead, causing the miscarriage is placed in another category, because the punishment was a fine determined by the woman’s husband and enforced by the court. It is important that we notice that in this case involving an accidentally caused miscarriage, the family and the court worked together to determine the fine, there was not a set law or statute about it. This reveals God’s desire to have both the family and the court involved in deciding these family matters.

In conclusion, we have to be honest about the fact that the Hebrew text seems to lean toward Exodus 21:22 being about a miscarriage, but it might only be about a premature birth. Furthermore, if the verse is about a miscarriage, the accidental death of the baby is not considered to have the same weight as the accidental death (“manslaughter”) of a mature human. Nevertheless, the death of the baby is treated seriously; the baby was alive in the womb and now it is dead, and a fine must be paid.

[For more information on the death penalty, see commentary on Exod. 21:12.]

**“fined, yes, fined.”** The phrase “fined, yes, fined” is the translation of the Hebrew text in which the verb “fined” is repeated twice. The first verb is an infinitive verb and the second verb is an imperfect verb. Repeating the verb twice in succession is the figure of speech polyptoton and it is used for emphasis, in this case emphasizing that the person who caused the harm was not to just walk away saying “No harm done,” but was to be fined.

[For more on polyptoton and the way it is translated in the REV, see commentary on Gen. 2:16, “eat, yes, eat.” Also, see the Word Study: “Polyptoton.”]

**“he is to pay *according to* judicial assessment.”** The local priest or judges would make sure the amount paid to the family was fair to both parties. The word of the judges was final; there was no system of appeal in ancient Israel. Once the priest or the judges decided, God commanded that the decision be obeyed. People who did not obey the decision of the priest or judge were put to death (Deut. 17:12).

Exd 21:23

**“you are to take life for life.”** The instruction to take “life for life, eye for eye, tooth for tooth, hand for hand, foot for foot, burning for burning, wound for wound, and bruise for bruise” (Exod. 21:23-25), was given as the maximum punishment you could give a person for what they had done. Sometimes the punishment could be reduced by paying a fine or doing something else. The law was to ensure that the “punishment fit the crime,” so to speak. So, for example, it was common in the ancient world that if an offender hurt someone who was of much higher standing in society than the offender, then the offender received a much harsher punishment than the offense deserved. This law in Exodus was meant to limit the punishment an offender could be given. In God’s eyes all people are equal, no matter who is rich, influential, or powerful and who is poor and needy. Sadly, in contrast to God’s laws and desires, it is common that poor people are oppressed by the rich and powerful.

Exd 21:24

**“eye for eye, tooth for tooth.”** Exodus 21:24 was quoted by Christ in the Sermon on the Mount (Matt. 5:38).

Exd 21:26

**“he must let him go free because of his eye.”** The master striking a slave in the face most likely occurred in an unplanned fit of anger, but that is no excuse for robbing a person of some of the blessings of life. God knows that the slave needs to get away from such an angry undisciplined person, and so the Law said that if a master permanently injured a slave the slave was to go free. The next verse, Exodus 21:27, mentions knocking out a tooth, but the eye and tooth are just examples showing that the slave is not to be permanently wounded or disfigured in any way. Human dignity requires humane treatment. The rabbis enumerated 24 things, including fingers, toes, and the tip of the nose that could not be injured or else the slave would go free.[[41]](#footnote-10475)

Exd 21:28

**“stoned, yes, stoned.”** The phrase “stoned, yes, stoned” is the translation of the Hebrew text in which the verb “stoned” is repeated twice. The first verb is an infinitive verb and the second verb is an imperfect verb. Repeating the verb twice in succession is the figure of speech polyptoton and it is used for emphasis, in this case emphasizing that the dangerous animal must be killed no matter how valuable it was to its owner.

[For more on polyptoton and the way it is translated in the REV, see commentary on Gen. 2:16, “eat, yes, eat.” Also, see the Word Study: “Polyptoton.”]

Exd 21:29

**“and its owner also must be put to death.”** God has no tolerance for those people who keep dangerous animals and ignore the health and life of other people. God’s law is harsh on evil and godless people and in that way it protects innocent and godly people. Sadly, most modern nations fall short on obeying God’s laws, and many innocent people suffer and die because of it. Of course, there are sometimes extenuating circumstances, but those can be sorted out if a country has and enforces godly laws and has godly judges.

Exd 21:30

**“If a ransom is imposed on him.”** It is the right of the family of the person who was killed to settle any case for less than the law demanded. In this case, there may have been some reason that the family of the one who was killed felt that they could accept some form of payment for the death of their family member instead of the death of the one who caused his death.

Exd 21:32

**“30 shekels.”** Roughly 12 ounces (340 grams). A shekel was roughly .4 ounces (11 or 11.5 grams). See commentary on Genesis 24:22, “shekel.” The 30 shekels were compensation for the master’s loss of the slave, but did not compensate the slave’s family (perhaps wife or children). This kind of thing was part of the risk of being a slave, and why being set free in the seventh year showed how important it is to God that people have a chance to live a free and productive life.

**“master.”** The Hebrew is more literally “lord,” which the REV generally translates in these cases as “master.” Also, the Hebrew word is a grammatical plural, literally, “lords,” which is a plural of emphasis or majesty, an honorific plural.

Exd 21:33

**“uncovers a pit.”** Generally, a “pit” in this context would be a cistern.

Exd 21:34

**“money.”** The Hebrew word means “silver,” and is also used for “money.”

**“owner.”** In the Hebrew text, the word “owner” is a grammatical plural; a plural of majesty or emphasis; an honorific plural.

Exd 21:36

**“owner.”** The Hebrew word is plural. This is a grammatical plural, literally, “owners,” but it refers to the one owner of the aggressive bull.

**Exodus Chapter 22**

Exd 22:1

**“five oxen for an ox, and four sheep for a sheep.”** Here in Exodus 22:1, the Torah teaches us that not all property has the same value. We know this, of course. There are things that do not mean much to us, and other things that mean a lot and/or are more inherently valuable. According to God’s law, a thief who steals a more valuable thing is required to pay more.

In this example, an ox is more valuable than a sheep both inherently, and also because it is likely that the owner of the ox would have spent considerable time training it to pull carts and plow. Stealing is very harmful to a society, and God takes it very seriously. If a thief cannot repay the debt he now owes because he stole, then he is sold into slavery for six years and goes free in the seventh (Exod. 22:3; 21:2). Modern society also makes people a kind of slave: we put them in prison where their life is not their own. They do, wear, eat, and sleep, what they are told to, and when their sentence is up they go free. Sadly, modern society often does not take stealing seriously, and thieves get little or no meaningful punishment, which only encourages more stealing.

If the thief still has the thing that he stole when he is caught, he still has to compensate for the anxiety and effort of the person he stole from and the society he damaged. He must give back what he stole and add one to it, thus paying “double” (Exod. 22:4). For example, if the person stole a sheep, then he would give back the sheep and add one more sheep as well. Here in Exodus 22:1, the ox and the sheep are only examples of things that are more valuable and things that are less valuable. For example, stealing a horse is not specifically mentioned in Exodus, but it would be considered a more valuable asset and the repayment would be five horses. On the other hand, if a person stole a chicken, that would be considered a less valuable asset and the thief would only have to repay four chickens. Also, the penalty for stealing a person—kidnapping—was death (Exod. 21:16).

To understand some of the anxiety and effort caused by stealing, it helps us to remember that in ancient times there was no police force. If something was stolen from a person, that person had to track down the thief himself, which usually meant taking considerable time, and also enlisting the help of friends and neighbors. The thief then had to be forcibly brought—often no easy task since the thief knew what was coming—before the local judges who would make a decision about the matter and determine if there was really a theft and if so what was stolen. We can imagine that that decision was often not easy, and enforcing the penalty was also not easy. The best course people had then, and now as well, was to be diligent to protect their things in the first place.

Exd 22:2

**“breaking in.”** The Hebrew is more literally, “digging through,” which is how a thief might enter a house; he would dig through the mud brick wall. In English, we would say he was “breaking into” the house. Thieves might “dig through” a shelter for animals to steal animals or dig through a storehouse in order to steal grain. We must remember that there were no truly effective artificial lights in the ancient world so after the sun went down images were unclear at best. A person inside their house who saw that the wall was being dug through would not be able to properly assess the threat, and so killing the intruder was the only safe choice. However, as Exodus 22:3 says, if the sun is up and the intruder can be seen to be just a weaponless thief, then the thief was to be subdued and later taken to the city judges who would oversee the punishment.

Exd 22:3

**“But if the sun has risen on him, there will be guilt for bloodshed *incurred*.”** Exodus 22:2-3 is about the ability of a person or family to protect their life and property. When comparing Exodus 22:2 with Exodus 22:3, it can be deduced that Exodus 22:2 is about a thief or someone coming into the house at night. In those days before lights, that could be a very dangerous situation, and the people in the house had to assume the intruder was dangerous, and that they needed to do whatever they could to defend themselves, which sometimes involved killing the intruder. In contrast, in Exodus 22:3, the sun was up, and so it could be seen who the intruder was and if they were dangerous or not. Of course, if an intruder was dangerous and of evil intent, then a homeowner could lawfully defend himself, but if it could be seen that the intruder was no real danger, but the homeowner killed him anyway, then the homeowner would be judged for his action.

**“A thief.”** The Hebrew is literally “he,” but that might cause confusion in the flow of this context. It refers to the thief.

**“make restitution, yes, restitution.”** The verb translated “make restitution” is repeated twice for emphasis; the first verb is an infinitive and the second is an imperfect. This is the figure of speech polyptoton and is used for emphasis (see commentary on Gen. 2:16), and God places great emphasis on the points of the laws that govern society. Thus, in Exodus 21-23, there is a great emphasis on the different points of Law. In Exodus chapter 21, there are ten polyptotons; in Exodus chapter 22, there are thirteen; and in Exodus chapter 23, there are five—for a total of twenty-eight polyptotons in these three chapters of law. In contrast, in the next three chapters, Exodus 24-26, there is not a single polyptoton.

**“If he has nothing, then he is to be sold because of his theft.”** Although this verse is speaking of theft, we must remember that “Torah” means “instruction” (not “law”) and that the Torah gave general guidelines about how to run a godly society. There are many ways to “steal” from others. Exodus 22 names some of them: stealing property, having your animal eat other people’s grain, being careless with your fire and letting it burn the property of other people, etc. The general principle is that if you take or destroy something that belongs to someone else, you have to pay for the damage you have done.

In Exodus 21:23-25, God put upper limits on how a criminal could be punished. In this case, the criminal cannot pay for his crime, so he is sold and will work as a slave for seven years. This is in contrast to the Babylonian Code of Hammurabi (paragraph 8), which says if the thief cannot pay for his theft, he is put to death.

Exd 22:4

**“If what was stolen is found, yes, found in his hand alive.”** In Exodus 22:1, if a man has killed or sold the animal he stole, then he has to pay five oxen for an ox and four sheep for a sheep (see commentary on Exod. 22:1). However, in this case the stolen animal is found alive, so the thief has to return it.

**“found, yes, found.”** The verb translated as “found” is repeated twice for emphasis; the first verb is an infinitive and the second is an imperfect. This is the figure of speech polyptoton and is used for emphasis (see commentary on Gen. 2:16).

**“he must pay double.”** The rabbis have explained for years that “double” referred to giving back the living animal and along with it one more like it. For example, Rabbi Umberto Cassudo writes: “*he shall pay double*, that is, what he has stolen and another like it. The law of twofold payment for the theft of chattels is referred to incidentally later on [in Exodus 22:6].”[[42]](#footnote-13087)

Exd 22:5

**“If a man grazes *his livestock...*or lets his animal loose and it grazes.”** The two examples are different, and it is important to understand the difference. The first example involves an arrogant bully—likely a rich and powerful man in the society—who purposely grazes his animals in another person’s field. The second example involves an “accident;” a man’s loose animal wanders into another man’s field and grazes. God’s concern is for the victim. Someone planted a field and someone else’s animal ate it. Whether on purpose or accidental, the man whose field was eaten has to be paid, both for the field and for the effort it takes to rectify the situation. Often today, people who cause damage by accident expect to just walk away with no consequences because “it was an accident.” That is not the way God thinks. Also, if more people who had “accidents” were held accountable, there would almost certainly be fewer “accidents” in society.

**“he is to make restitution.”** The law of Moses protects victims. There have always been evil people and bullies who take advantage of others. The court system is supposed to protect victims from those selfish people. In this case, if a man’s animals ate another man’s field, the animal owner would have to pay for the loss. If he could not pay, he was sold into the seven-year slavery system to pay for his debt (see commentary on Exod. 22:3). In this making restitution, we see that the penalty described in Exodus 21:23-25, “life for life, eye for eye, tooth for tooth, hand for hand, foot for foot, burning for burning, wound for wound, and bruise for bruise” did not just apply to a human hurting another human, but was instruction in how to think about crime and/or destruction and how to treat people justly and in a godly fashion.

**“from the best of his own field.”** The perpetrator whose animal ate in another man’s field and who had to pay the fine might argue, “But the field my animal ate was not very good, so I shouldn’t have to pay with the best of my field.” From God’s point of view, that fact does not matter. There is time and effort involved in getting repaid. For example, how far away is the perpetrator’s field? Even a “short distance” to us, such as two miles, was a huge inconvenience when a person had to walk it, driving a pack mule.

Exd 22:6

**“If fire breaks out.”** God’s laws written in the Bible protect victims and hold people responsible for their actions, including “accidents.” The phrase “if fire breaks out” is a perfect example of an “accident.” In the biblical period, people cooked over fires, so the fires always had to be carefully watched. With the unpredictable winds in the Middle East, and so many flammable things such as fields and houses, any fire had to be watched very carefully. We can feel sorry for the person whose fire accidentally got out of control, but we need to be more sorry for, and treat justly, the person who suffered loss due to someone else’s fire.

**“the shocks of grain or the standing grain.”** A “shock” of grain is a self-standing bundle of grain stalks that have been cut and tied together so they can stand upright to dry. This is ancient technology and is only done today when primitive harvesting practices are being done, perhaps in a setting such as among the Amish people. In contrast to the grain that has been cut and is standing up in shocks, the “standing grain” had not been harvested yet. Samson burned up the grain of the Philistines, both the shocks and standing grain (Judg. 15:5).

**“the one who started the fire.”** Accidents happen, but they will happen a lot less if the person who “accidentally” did not prepare for, pay attention to, or control what he was doing is held responsible for the accident. Obviously, there are times when accidents cannot be helped and no one is genuinely responsible, but in this case, the person purposely lit a fire, and if it is not properly prepared for and watched over, a fire can get out of control. The point is that there are kinds of accidents where it is reasonable to hold a person responsible for the accident. If societies were more diligent about doing this, there would be fewer “accidents.”

**“make restitution, yes, restitution.”** The verb translated “make restitution” is repeated twice for emphasis; the first verb is an infinitive and the second is an imperfect. This is the figure of speech polyptoton and is used for emphasis (see commentary on Gen. 2:16). In this case, the emphasis is on full restitution. If a person cannot afford to make restitution, they are to be sold into the seven-year slavery system to pay their debt (see commentary on Exod. 22:3).

Exd 22:7

**“he must pay double.”** That is, “he,” the thief, must pay double. He must pay back what he stole and the same amount again (see commentary on Exod. 22:4).

Exd 22:8

**“owner.”** The Hebrew is *baal*, which is better translated as “owner” in this case.

**“judges.”** The word of the judges was final; there was no system of appeal in ancient Israel. Once the priest or the judges decided, God commanded that the decision be obeyed. People who did not obey the decision of the priest or judge were put to death (Deut. 17:12). For more on the translation “judges,” see commentary on Exodus 21:6.

Exd 22:9

**“for any kind of lost thing, about which one can say, ‘This is mine,’”** In the ancient world, it would be much more difficult to steal certain types of things because so much was handmade or was easily distinguishable. Nevertheless, there were plenty of things that were not distinguishable, and in any disagreement, the local judges would almost certainly get involved.

**“judges condemn.”** The Hebrew verb “condemn” is a plural verb, which is good evidence that translating the Hebrew word *elohim* as “judges” in this context is correct. When *elohim* refers to the one true God, the verbs associated with it are singular (see commentary on Exod. 21:6).

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Exd 22:10

**“or is carried away.”** The Hebrew text is more literally, “captured.” We can tell from the scope of Scripture, especially Exodus 22:13, that this refers to predatory animals such as the lions that lived in the ancient Middle East (the lions and other big cats went extinct in the Middle East during the Roman period because the Romans caught them and used them in gladiator games). The predatory animals would capture and carry away sheep, goats, calves, etc. If the donkey or sheep was carried off when no one saw it, which would have often been because predatory animals hunted at night, then the person who was supposed to be keeping the animal would swear he did not take it, and that oath was to be sufficient so that no restitution was required (Exod. 22:11).

Exd 22:11

**“owner.”** The word “owner” is a grammatical plural. An honorific plural; a plural of majesty.

**“its owner must accept it.”** A major theme in the Torah, God’s “instruction book,” is personal responsibility. The point of Exodus 22:10-11 is that everyone is responsible for their own possessions. If a person is unable to watch over his possessions for a time, then he (or she) must be very careful in picking someone to watch his stuff, because if it somehow disappears the one who said he would watch over the stuff only has to swear he did not take it himself, and the matter is settled. The stuff is gone somehow, but there is no retribution required. The lesson in this is that each person is responsible for his own things. If you must leave something with someone, you should pick someone who you trust and who is a responsible person who will be diligent in keeping it safe. But even then, if your stuff gets lost, you lose what you own. No one is ultimately responsible for your things but you.

But there is an exception that involves risk for the one who agreed to keep watch over the things. If anything is stolen, the one who agreed to watch the things must pay back for what was stolen. He does not have to pay the owner double, but he has to make good the loss (Exod. 22:12). Part of the lesson here is that you do not want to agree to watch over someone else’s things unless you have clear boundaries (“How long will I have to watch this?”) and are quite sure you can indeed keep the goods safe.

Exd 22:12

**“But if it was stolen, yes, stolen from him.”** This seems to contradict Exodus 22:10, which says that if the animal was taken but nobody saw it, the person who was keeping the animal does not have to pay restitution. But in this case the animal was “stolen,” that is, by human thieves, and the person who was keeping the animal must have been negligent in some way. If the person keeping the animal knew he could not keep the animals safe, then he should never have agreed to keep the animals in the first place.

**“owner.”** The word “owner” is a grammatical plural. An honorific plural; a plural of majesty.

Exd 22:13

**“torn, yes, torn to pieces *by wild animals*.”** The “by wild animals” added in the REV in italics is implied in the verb. The doubling of the verb “torn” is the figure of speech polyptoton, used for emphasis to show the totality of the tearing. In other words, this animal was torn to pieces, not just wounded or hurt.

If a lion or other animal kills a domestic animal like a cow, donkey, sheep, or goat, there is almost always some evidence of what happened, and the person in charge of the animal would bring pieces of it to the owner as evidence the animal had been killed and eaten by predators (e.g., Amos 3:12).

Exd 22:14

**“its owner not being with it.”** Borrowing things is risky. God’s law and God’s heart are that if anyone is kind enough to loan you something you don’t have or cannot afford, that person should not take the loss if you lose or break what you borrowed. God tells people to take responsibility for their lives and what they do, and that includes what they borrow. Too many people today just say “I’m sorry” and think that is all they have to do if they can’t return something they borrowed. But God’s heart is to protect the people who are kind enough to allow others to borrow their things, so the responsibility of the person who borrows is to return what was borrowed, and if it is broken or lost, to replace it.

**“owner.”** The word “owner” is a grammatical plural. An honorific plural; a plural of majesty.

**“restitution, yes, restitution.”** The verb translated “make restitution” is repeated twice for emphasis; the first verb is an infinitive and the second is an imperfect. This is the figure of speech polyptoton and is used for emphasis (see commentary on Gen. 2:16).

Exd 22:15

**“owner.”** The word “owner” is a grammatical plural; an honorific plural; a plural of majesty.

**“the loss is covered by its rent.”** The Hebrew text is very abbreviated and thus unclear in English. The Hebrew text is simply, “it came for its hire.”

Exodus 22:15 has two sentences and covers two possible situations. The first sentence covers that if a person borrowed something (likely an animal (Exod. 22:14)) but for some reason he thought the animal might be hurt or die while it was being borrowed. In that case, he could make sure the owner of the animal was there at the time so that the owner could see that the animal was being properly cared for and not abused, and therefore the injury or death was unavoidable. In that case, with the owner present, the person who borrowed the animal (or the thing) did not have to make restitution to the owner.

The second sentence in the verse, “If it was rented, the loss is covered by its rent,” explains what happens when a person rents something or an animal but the thing or animal is broken, hurt, or dies while it is rented. In that case, the owner who rented out the animal knew there was some possibility that the thing or animal might be hurt, broken, or dead while it was rented out, but he was willing to accept that risk in return for the rent money he was paid. So if the thing is hurt or dies while it is rented out, the owner gets the rent money but nothing more, and the needy person who paid the rent money loses the rent money even if the animal did not finish the job it was hired to do.

These verses provide instruction for us today as to how to live godly lives in society. For example, if a person needed to borrow a lawn mower to mow his grass because his mower was temporarily broken, he can simply borrow a mower and take the chance that it will be fine doing the job and he will just return it once his own grass is mowed. But if in that situation the lawnmower he borrowed broke for some reason, he would have to pay to get it fixed or to get a new one to give to the man who loaned him the lawnmower. But if the man who needed to borrow the mower suspected that something was wrong with the lawnmower he wanted to borrow, he could absolve himself of responsibility for it by having the owner come over and watch him mow the grass (perhaps offer to have the owner come over on a Sunday afternoon and have a beer and watch the ballgame while you mowed your lawn). Then the owner would know that the borrower did not “do something wrong” and break the mower. In that case, if the mower broke while the owner was there with it, the borrower was absolved of responsibility and did not have to pay for the mower.

Similarly, if the man who needed to borrow the mower thought that something might go wrong with it while he was borrowing it, he could offer to rent it from the owner. Then, if something did go wrong with the mower, the owner got the rent money and the borrower did not have to pay more than the rent amount that he agreed to pay to borrow the mower.

Exd 22:16

**“pay a bride-price.”** It seems that custom set the bride-price, or “dowry” at 50 shekels of silver (Deut. 22:29). “Pay a bride price” is one word in the Hebrew.

**“he must pay, yes, pay a bride-price for her to be his wife.”** The unspoken expectation is that if a man seduces a virgin, he is to marry her, and that includes paying the bride-price to her father. The standard bride-price was 50 shekels of silver (Deut. 22:29). There is more about a man seducing a woman in Deuteronomy 22:23-29.

**“pay, yes, pay.”** In the Hebrew text the word “pay” is repeated twice for emphasis, which is the figure of speech polyptoton (see commentary on Gen. 2:16).

Exd 22:17

**“refuses, yes, refuses.”** In the Hebrew text the word “refuses” is repeated twice for emphasis, which is the figure of speech polyptoton (see commentary on Gen. 2:16). The meaning here is “absolutely refuses.”

**“pay money.”** The Hebrew is literally, “weight out silver” according to the bride-price.

Exd 22:18

**“You must not allow...to live.”** Exodus 22:18-20 are three commands in which the offenders are to be put to death, and all three offenses are connected to the worship of other gods instead of Yahweh. The sorceress works with supernatural forces—gods and goddesses, i.e., demons—to control different aspects of life on earth. The person who has sex with animals often did so due to beliefs about summoning or enticing pagan gods or the power of the gods. The third command concerns those who openly worship pagan gods. In all three cases, God is vying for the love and worship of His people, which is being taken away from Him by pagan gods. Furthermore, God knows what people are often ignorant of, which is that relationships with pagan gods are never beneficial. John 10:10 says it well: “The thief does not come except to steal and kill and destroy.” The only reason that pagan gods (i.e., demons) enter into relationships with humans is to inflict some kind of injury, harm, or evil on the person and human society. The people who are responsible for bringing evil and harm to society were to be put to death.

**“sorceress.”** A “sorceress” is a woman who seeks to control things in the natural world by summoning or controlling supernatural forces. It is recognized in law codes from different nations that some magic was intended to harm and some magic was intended for a supposedly good cause. The Bible makes no such distinction. Magic was about control, and sorcerers and sorceresses sought to exert control above the will of God. Also, God knew the “forces” that the sorcerers were enlisting to help them were demonic, and any assistance given by demons will end badly. Exodus 22:18 mentions sorceresses, not sorcerers, males, because there were many more females involved in witchcraft than males. The norms of ancient society were one reason for that. While men could often dictate their choices and destiny, women in the ancient world were generally at the mercy of the men in their lives. There was almost nothing they could do without getting some man to allow it or make it happen. So it was more natural for them to seek the help of invisible supernatural forces to get what they wanted. There were male sorcerers also, and by extension, this law would apply to them too; the masculine form of the word occurs in Deuteronomy 18:10.

The Hebrew phrase “not…to live” is unusual and is therefore especially forceful. The more normal expression in the Hebrew text is “put to death,” which occurs in Leviticus 20:27. The sorcerer was to be put to death because of their intimate involvement with demons, who are the avowed enemies of God and are hurtful to all of God’s creation. There are only two ultimate supernatural sources: God and the Devil. Anyone who is working with supernatural powers that are not from God is working with God’s enemy and is genuinely harmful to God’s creation. There is no such thing as “good” witchcraft. Demons do come as angels of light, “helpful” angels (cf. 2 Cor. 11:14), but in the end, they always turn “good” into evil.

In the times of the Old Testament, the average believer did not have the gift of holy spirit that was poured out upon every believer on the Day of Pentecost (Acts 2) and so they had to deal with spiritual wickedness in a physical way, by putting the evil person to death. Today, every believer has the gift of holy spirit (Eph. 2:13-14) and so we wrestle against evil forces with spiritual weapons (Eph. 6:10-20).

A lesson we can learn from Exodus 22:18 is that it is very dangerous for a person to disobey God and get involved with the demonic realm to get information and power instead of turning to God for information and power. Not only does it help the Enemy, but it also harms the person in many ways, particularly from a Day of Judgment perspective. Christians who work with the Enemy mar themselves and the Church, and will be marred for it (1 Cor. 3:17).

[For more on God’s prohibitions about working with demons in different ways, see commentary on Deut. 18:9-14. For more specific information about sorcery, see commentary on Deut. 18:10.]

Exd 22:19

**“Whoever has sex with an animal.”** Sex with animals is forbidden by God, but it was apparently common in the ancient world so it is mentioned several times in the Mosaic Law (Exod. 22:19; Lev. 18:23; 20:16; Deut. 27:21). It is important to notice that any sex with any kind of animal was forbidden by God because in the cultures around Israel that was not the case. For example, according to Hittite law, sex with some kinds of animals was allowed while sex with other animals was forbidden.[[43]](#footnote-12657)

In the cultures around Israel, sex with animals was sometimes ritualized and connected to magic. Although we often think of ritual sex, such as temple prostitution, to be simple acts of lust, they were often justified by connecting the act to sympathetic magic. So, for example, the “gods” were ostensibly observing the sex going on in the temple and then they “get the idea” of it and do whatever it was they did to fertilize the earth so there would be abundant crops. So the simple but thoroughly pagan idea was to have sex in the temple so there would be an abundant harvest in the land.

Rabbi Umberto Cassuto writes: “These despicable practices were sometimes connected with magic, and there are many references to them in pagan mythology. In Ugaritic poetry, it is narrated that Baal had intercourse with a cow in order to be saved magically from death that awaited him as a result of the devices of Mot, the king of the netherworld; and in the epic of Gilgamesh, there are references to the relations of the goddess Ishtar with various animals.”[[44]](#footnote-30394) A Roman statue found at Pompeii is of the god Pan having sex with a goat.[[45]](#footnote-15431)

Leviticus 18:23 says that sex with animals “is a perversion.” The Hebrew word translated as “perversion” also means “confusion” and “disgrace” (*HALOT*). For a person to have sex with an animal is a perversion of God’s created order. We can see this beginning in Genesis 2:18-25, when God created all the animals and Adam, but Adam was still alone and needed another human to be with him. It is also echoed in Romans 1:26, when a man having sex with a woman is referred to as “natural sexual relations.”

**“death, yes, death.”** In the Hebrew text the word “death” is repeated twice for emphasis, which is the figure of speech polyptoton (see commentary on Gen. 2:16).

Exd 22:20

**“He who sacrifices to the gods.”** The word “gods” is *elohim*, and it can refer to God, gods, a god, or a representative of God such as a judge (see commentary on Exod. 21:6). Here in Exodus 22:20 the meaning is almost certainly “gods,” referring to pagan gods, but it would be possible that it would also include representatives of God, such as judges (*elohim* is used of judges in Exod. 21:6; 22:8, and 22:9). Although the Israelite culture did not generally include sacrificing to great men, pagan cultures did (e.g., Dan. 2:46). Thus, it is possible that God worded the Hebrew text the way it is to forbid both possibilities: sacrificing to any god or human except Yahweh.

**“devoted to destruction.”** In this context, the phrase means executed (see commentary on Josh. 2:10 and 6:17).

Exd 22:21

**“foreigner.”** The Hebrew word is most often translated as “sojourner,” but in this context, “foreigner” seems to make better sense, and it is within the semantic range of the Hebrew word.

**“for you were foreigners in the land of Egypt.”** The “for” is not causal (i.e., “because”) but ethical. It is not “because” the Israelites were oppressed foreigners in Egypt that they were not to oppress other foreigners; rather, it was due to the fact that the Israelites had been oppressed foreigners that they knew from experience what an injustice oppression is, and therefore they knew from experience it was wrong and godly people did not oppress other people.

Exd 22:22

**“mistreat.”** The Hebrew word translated in the REV as “mistreat” is *ʿanah* (#06031 עָנָה), and it has a very wide range of meanings as can be seen by the large number of different translations that appear in the English versions (e.g., “afflict” (ASV), “do no wrong” (BBE); “abuse” (CJB), “mistreat” (CSB), “hurt” (Douay), “wrong” (NAB), “oppress” (NASB2020), “take advantage of” (NIV2011), “exploit” (NLT)). There were countless ways that a widow or orphan could be mistreated, abused, and exploited in the ancient world, and the best defense against that was a large and mutually supportive family.

**“widow or fatherless child.”** God has special concern for the disadvantaged, such as the widow and fatherless child, and mentions that many times in Scripture (cf. Exod. 22:22; Deut. 10:18; 14:29; 24:17, 19, 21; 26:12; 27:19; 1 Tim. 5:3-15).

**“fatherless child.”** Many English versions translate the Hebrew as “orphan,” but the Hebrew word can refer to either a fatherless child or an orphan. Sadly, in the ancient world there was often little difference. In practice, women were not allowed to defend themselves in court or inherit land. Thus, a child without a father was quite helpless and could end up in endless servitude or slavery. God expected families to help each other, but sometimes they did not. Similarly, God commanded people to be good to the widow and fatherless, but often they were not.

Exd 22:23

**“mistreat, yes, mistreat...cry out, yes, cry out...hear, yes, hear.”** The repetition is the figure of speech polyptoton, which occurs when the same verb appears twice in succession in a sentence but the verb is inflected in different ways. Here in Exodus 22:23, in all three pairs of verbs, the first verb is an infinitive verb and the second verb is in the imperfect tense.

The fact that this sentence has three pairs of verbs for emphasis would surely have caught the attention of anyone reading the Hebrew text. God is being very emphatic that He does not want the widow and the fatherless child, who have a hard enough life as it is, to be badly treated by people, and will deal harshly with anyone who takes advantage of the widow or defenseless child.

[For more on polyptoton and the way it is translated in the REV, see commentary on Gen. 2:16, “eat, yes, eat.”]

**“hear, yes, hear.”** In this context, “hear” means much more than just “hear,” it means to hear and do something about the situation. This is the “pregnant” or idiomatic sense of the verb (see commentary on Luke 23:42, “remember me”).

Exd 22:24

**“I will kill you with the sword.”** This is the idiom of agency. God will not literally pick up a sword and kill the offender, but someone who is acting as His agent will do it (for more on agency, see commentary on Matt. 8:5).

Also, in this context “kill with the sword” is a form of synecdoche where one part is put for many parts, in this case, one way of killing is put for many (or all) ways of killing. The text is not saying that an abuser will always die by the sword, but he will die in some way, one of which would be the sword.

[See Word Study: “Synecdoche.”]

Exd 22:25

**“nor are you to charge him interest.”** The command to not charge interest on a loan to a fellow Israelite occurs in several places in the Torah (cf. Exod. 22:25; Lev. 25:35-38; Deut. 23:19-20; see commentary on Deut. 23:19 and 23:20).

Exd 22:26

**“take, yes, take.”** The Hebrew text repeats the same verb twice, the first use being an infinitive form, and the second use being an imperfect form of the verb. This is the figure of speech polyptoton and it is used for emphasis (see commentary on Gen. 2:16).

**“take as collateral.”** The Hebrew text only uses one verb, used twice in succession, and it means “take as a pledge” or “take as collateral.”

**“you must return it to him before the sun goes down.”** This is a command and it reflects the mercy of God and also how people who lend things based on collateral have to trust God that even if what they lent gets broken or somehow is not returned, they will be made whole somehow by God—they do not get to keep the collateral if the borrower needs it to live. The lender has to be the “bigger person” and absorb the loss if what they lent is not returned. To keep what someone needed to survive would be cruel, and that behavior is never sanctioned by God.

Exd 22:27

**“for that is his only covering.”** In biblical times, clothing and blankets were handmade. Therefore, it was common for people, even people who were not considered “poor,” to only have one outer cloak, which they would use as a blanket and covering at night. God is so merciful that He commands that if such a person has to give his cloak as collateral for a loan of some kind, even if something unexpected happens and he cannot repay the loan by nightfall, his cloak must be returned to him so he can have a restful night’s sleep. But it is likely that the man would have to give the cloak back to the lender again the next day as security for the loan—the loan is not forgiven just because the poor man could not pay it back immediately.

As part of the Torah, God’s “instruction book,” this record should teach us that God cares for the poor and needy and that just because a person cannot repay a loan or debt does not mean that we should not give the person extra time to repay the loan.

Exd 22:28

**“revile God.”** This is a case where the two stanzas in the verse may be saying basically the same thing. The word translated as “God” is *elohim*, which can refer to God or a representative of God (see commentary on Gen. 1:1). Actually, this is a likely case of the figure of speech amphibologia, where one thing is said but it can refer to two things, both of which are true.[[46]](#footnote-29729) God forbids reviling Him and reviling His agents and representatives, such as the judges (e.g. Exod. 22:8, 9).

The word translated as “revile” has a semantic range that includes “curse,” “speak contemptuously of,” and “make light of.” God wants Himself and His representatives to be respected and held in honor.,

Exd 22:29

**“You must not delay *offering*.”** God wanted the Levites and priests to get the tithe of the Israelites right away. Farmers might have a tendency to delay for a number of reasons, one being the time it took to get the tithe to a Levitical city to give it to the Levites there. But grain and grape juice change dramatically over time, and can be ruined if not handled quickly after being harvested, so God commanded that the tithes and offerings be taken quickly to the Levites and priests.

**“You are to give the firstborn of your sons to me.”** God had also said this in a less specific way in Exodus 13:2. But here in Exodus 22:29 and also in Exodus 34:19-20, God clarifies the command of Exodus 13:2 and says it applies to just the males, not the females. However, He changed this command and decided to take the Levites instead (Num. 8:16).

[For more on the redemption of a firstborn child if it was a baby boy, see commentary on Exod. 13:13.]

Exd 22:30

**“Seven days it will be with its mother.”** The baby calf or lamb was to be with its mother for at least seven days, and on the eighth day or after that day, it could be sacrificed. Human babies were not accepted to be given and redeemed until 30 days (Num. 18:16).

**“you are to give it to me.”** They gave the cattle and sheep to God by eventually sacrificing them, although the animal did not have to be sacrificed that very day. Nevertheless, it was set apart to God and would be sacrificed later. When God said, “you are to give it to me,” the offerer gave the animal to God by giving it to the priest, who would then sacrifice the animal when the time was right.

In practical application, we can see that people would sometimes just have to do the best that they could to keep the Law. If a shepherd had a large flock of sheep, the female sheep would give birth at a general time in the spring, and “lambing season” can last six to eight weeks, depending on the care and age of the flock and other factors. A shepherd who had a lamb born every day for six weeks could not run back and forth every eighth day to the Tabernacle or to where the nearest priest lived. He would likely wait until the season ended and round up the firstborn male animals and take them to the priest.

Exd 22:31

**“you are not to eat any flesh that is torn to pieces in the field.”** Since no “unclean” animals were allowed to be eaten under any circumstances, this phrase in Exodus 22:31 refers to clean animals. This rule is stated more generally in Leviticus 11:39.

**“you are to throw it to the dogs.”** Dogs were considered unclean in the biblical world and were not generally kept as pets, but roamed the streets and ate garbage and whatever else they could find, including dead bodies. In fact, the dogs that roamed the cities and countryside of the ancient world were a major reason that dead bodies usually disappeared fairly quickly. The Bible has a number of verses about dogs eating dead bodies (cf. Exod. 22:31; 1 Kings 14:11; 16:4; 21:19, 23, 24; 22:38; 2 Kings 9:10, 36). For example, dogs ate the body of Queen Jezebel after Jehu had her thrown down from an upper window (2 Kings 9:10, 36-37). The shepherds, and some farmers, often kept dogs to help herd and protect the sheep, but that was generally an exception in the culture.

[For more on dogs eating dead bodies, see commentary on Jer. 14:16.]

**Exodus Chapter 23**

Exd 23:1

**“Do not spread a false report.”** The Hebrew word translated as “spread” is *nasah* (#05375 נָשָׂא, נָסָה), and it has the meaning “take up,” “carry,” “give” (NET), “repeat” (CJB), “pass along” (NLT), “spread” (NIV). The idea is that a person has the responsibility to check out what they hear to see if it is true before passing it along to others. Exodus 23:1 is similar in some ways to the Ninth Commandment: “Do not give false testimony against your neighbor.” But in that case, you could be inventing the lie yourself and speaking it, whereas in this case, in Exodus 23:1, you have heard something and pass it along before checking the truth of what you heard. But the command to the Christian is more stringent than this rule in the Old Testament. For sure, we don’t spread unsubstantiated information, but beyond that, even if it’s true, we don’t just blabber what we know; we need to speak the truth in love (Eph. 4:15) and let that speech be “always with grace” (Col. 4:6).

**“Do not join your hand with the wicked *to help them* by being a malicious witness.”** God wants human society to be peaceful and kind, and that means standing against wickedness. Wicked people want and usually need the support of others, and pressure people to help them. The righteous must resist giving that support; people who help the wicked to do evil are evil themselves, and God warns that no matter how many handshakes and agreements are made between the wicked, they will all be punished. “Though hand join in hand, the wicked shall not be unpunished” (Prov. 11:21 KJV).

Exd 23:2

**“Do not follow the majority to do evil.”** The command of God is to do what is right, just, and godly, even if others are not. This can be a hard command to obey, especially for people with low self-confidence or low self-esteem, who tend to rely on other people and do not want to stand out from the crowd. This is a major reason why Christians need other like-minded Christians to fellowship with and who will help them grow strong in the Lord (Eph. 6:10). It is also important to have alone time with God to read the Bible, pray, and talk to yourself about standing for the Lord in difficult situations.

**“go along with the majority in perverting *justice*.”** This translation is the most likely meaning of the verse, but the Hebrew text allows for another, but seemingly less likely meaning, a meaning that is represented in a few Bible versions. For example, the LSV reads, “to turn aside after many to cause [others] to turn aside” (Young’s Literal Translation reads similarly). Understood that way, the verse is saying that if one person turns aside [from justice] it can cause others to follow and also turn aside from justice.

The Hebrew word translated as “perverting” is also used in Exodus 23:6. It is not the most common word for “pervert”; that word is used in Exodus 23:8.

It is possible that the verse is worded the way it is in the Hebrew text to allow for both understandings: a person is not to follow a majority and pervert justice, and a person should be aware that if he turns aside [from justice] that other people might be influenced by his actions and turn aside too. Truth and justice are very important to God, and each person has the responsibility to be truthful and just in what they do. In a world ruled by evil forces, there can be consequences for following truth, but there is a Day of Judgment coming when people who follow truth will be richly rewarded, while those who abandon truth for personal comfort and safety will be punished.

Exd 23:3

**“Do not favor a poor man in his lawsuit.”** God is righteous, and He does not tolerate evil and injustice. To some people it seems the right thing to do to favor a poor person in a lawsuit just because he or she is poor and the other party “can afford it.” But that is injustice, and God is against it. Courts have to be right and righteous in their dealings. In contrast, Exodus 23:6 says not to deny justice to a poor person who cannot defend himself in court (see commentary on Exod. 23:6).

Exd 23:4

**“you must return, yes, return it to him.”** This command of God has mostly been forgotten in our modern world. People who find lost things usually act as if they have a right to keep what they find. They do not! In fact, the person who finds the lost item has a responsibility to try to find out who lost it and return it to that person. That may not be a convenient thing to do. In the case of a lost ox or donkey, the animal may have wandered miles away from home, and returning it might be a serious inconvenience, but that is what God says to do. In order to have a godly society, the people in that society must be willing to make the sacrifices that it takes to obey God.

Your enemy is still a human being, and the golden rule applies to you in this situation: “however you want people to treat you, treat them the same way, for this is the Law and the Prophets” (Matt. 7:12). The Second Greatest Commandment also applies: “You must love your neighbor as yourself” (Lev. 19:18).

Exd 23:5

**“one who hates you.”** Exodus 23:4 and 23:5 fit together and speak of two very realistic possibilities in the ancient world: animals that wander off and animals that are overloaded and fall down. The verses mention “your enemy” and “one who hates you,” and thus cover a lot of people you would not “want” to help. But the Law speaks of loving your “neighbor,” and Jesus showed in the Parable of the Good Samaritan that your “neighbor” could be any fellow human being. Part of being loving to others and obedient to God is helping people even if you don’t like them and helping people when it is inconvenient to do so.

**“do not refrain from raising it, you must raise, yes, raise it up with him.”** The Hebrew word translated as “raise” in the REV is *ʿazav* (#05800 עָזַב), and it occurs three times in Exodus 23:5, and it has caused translators and commentators a lot of problems. The idea for the translation “raise” comes from the meaning of the word in Nehemiah 3:8, where the walls of Jerusalem were “restored,” or raised. The JPS translation reads that you “would refrain from raising it, you must nevertheless raise it with him.” The Douay-Rheims version concludes the verse with the translation that you “shall lift him up with him,” that is lift the donkey up with the one who hates you. The word “raise” makes perfect sense in the context because the donkey had fallen down, and it needed to be raised back up so it could continue its work.

Exd 23:6

**“pervert.”** This same word is used in Exodus 23:2. The idea of the Hebrew text is that what is due poor people can be “stretched out” or “twisted” to the point that the poor people do not get a fair hearing in the court system. Exodus 23:3 and 23:6 cover both sides of justice for the poor and needy. Exodus 23:3 says not to favor a poor person just because he is poor, and Exodus 23:6 says not to deny the poor person justice and take advantage of him just because he does not have the means to defend himself in court.

There is a more common Hebrew word that means “pervert” that is not used here, but is used in Exodus 23:8.

Exd 23:7

**“and do not kill the innocent and righteous.”** There are many ways of killing innocent people besides outright murder, but God sees them all, and sees the heart and intent of anyone who would kill an innocent person by any means. David killed Uriah by putting him on the front lines of a battle, and that angered God.

**“for I will not justify the wicked.”** This is actually the figure of speech tapeinosis, or understatement, where something is understated in order to magnify it.[[47]](#footnote-23008) The meaning is thus, “I will condemn the wicked.” The same figure occurs in Exodus 20:7.

[See Word Study: “Tapeinosis.”]

Exd 23:8

**“a bribe blinds those who have sight.”** This is a metaphorical statement. The words “blinds” and “sight” do not refer to literal physical sight, but to mental blindness and mental sight. A bribe blinds a person so that they cannot “see” what is right and just and fair—they are blind to what is the righteous and godly thing to do. Sadly, and more consequentially, a bribe blinds a person to the future Judgment Day, when God will judge people for how they lived, and on that day, it will be too late to say “I’m sorry.” The judgment on Judgment Day will be irreversible and final, and depending on how the person has lived, the sentence may be death in the Lake of Fire (Rev. 20:11-15). When God says, “Do not take a bribe,” He is deadly serious.

There are many verses in the Bible about not taking bribes. For example, Deuteronomy 16:19 says basically the same thing as Exodus 23:8.

**“perverts.”** This is the more standard word for “perverts,” to pervert or twist. A less common word is used in Exod. 23:2 and 23:6.

Exd 23:9

**“Do not oppress.”** There are many ways to oppress people. A standard way of oppressing foreigners in the ancient world was overcharging them for food and material goods and services they needed. Leviticus 19:13 says not to oppress your neighbor.

**“foreigner.”** The Hebrew word is most often translated as “sojourner,” but in this context, “foreigner” seems to make better sense, and it is within the semantic range of the Hebrew word.

**“you know how a foreigner feels.”** The Hebrew is more literally, “you know the ‘soul’ (or “life,” the way of life) of a foreigner,” or, using the Hebrew word, “you know the *nephesh* (#05315 נֶפֶשׁ) of a foreigner.” The Hebrew word *nephesh*, often translated as “soul,” has many meanings, including a person’s thoughts and emotions, which is its meaning here. God is in essence saying, “You know the life of a foreigner,” that is, how challenging it can be.

[For more on *nephesh* and “soul,” see Word Study: “Psuchē.”]

Exd 23:10

**“produce.”** The Hebrew word means “produce (i.e., what it produces), yield.” Each person is to sow their land for six years and take what it yields, but let the land go fallow in the seventh year, as per Exodus 23:11.

Exd 23:11

**“let it rest.”** This is a technical use of the Hebrew word.

**“so that the poor of your people may eat.”** During the harvest season, the poor people would glean behind the reapers, just as Ruth did (Ruth 2:2-3). However, in the seventh year, the land was to be left alone and not plowed or planted, so there was no formal harvest. Even so, there would be food for the poor people. The farming practices of the ancient world were not completely efficient. It often happened as a harvester was cutting grain with a scythe or sickle that the blow to the grain stalk would dislodge some grains of the wheat or barley or whatever the crop was, and those grains would fall to the ground and then germinate and grow. Poor people depended on that for food. In contrast to the grain, the vineyards and olive trees would produce fruit as normal, but only the poor and needy were to harvest that fruit.

Exd 23:12

**“rest...refreshed.”** The animals “rest” physically, but the people are “refreshed” in both their mind and body.

**“the son of your slave girl.”** The Sabbath was for everyone. Here the “son of your slave girl” is mentioned because he would be among the lowest people in the extended family system, and it would be likely that if anyone was told to work on the Sabbath he would be a likely choice. In fact, it might be possible that he was so lowly in the family system that some people might have tended to think God did not mean for him to rest like the others did. But God shows His love for all people by mentioning this otherwise potentially overlooked person.

Exd 23:13

**“invoke.”** Although the Hebrew word can be translated as “mention,” that seems incorrect here; even the prophets “mentioned” the names of other gods, such as Baal. For example, Baal is mentioned by prophets (e.g., Jer. 2:8; Hos. 2:8; Zeph. 1:4), and so is Chemosh (Jer. 48:7) and so is Molech (Jer. 32:35). Other English versions also use “invoke” (e.g., CJB, CSB, NIV, NRSV, REB. The CEB and NLT say not to “call on” the names of other gods).

Exd 23:14

**“celebrate a feast to me three times a year.”** There was to be a pilgrimage feast three times a year in Israel’s religious calendar (“Pilgrimage feast” is one word in the Hebrew, meaning a feast that people would travel to.). These three pilgrimage feasts are listed in Exodus 23:14-17 and are the Feast of Unleavened Bread (Exod. 23:15), the Feast of Harvest (aka, the “Feast of Weeks” and “Pentecost;” Exod. 23:16), and the Feast of Ingathering (aka, the “Feast of Booths,” sometimes more popularly called the Feast of Tabernacles; Exod. 23:16).

These three pilgrimage feasts are the heart of Israel’s religious calendar. All three feasts are anchored in the soil and thus the production of the food that stabilized Israel. So all three pilgrimage feasts, the Feast of Unleavened Bread, the Feast of Harvest, and the Feast of Ingathering, were all celebrations of God’s abundant provision for Israel. All three feasts focused on a harvest. The Feast of Unleavened Bread focused on the barley harvest, the Feast of Harvest focused on the wheat harvest, and the Feast of Ingathering focused on the completion of all the harvests of the year. Thus, these three feasts were to be times of tremendous thanksgiving to God.

These three feasts are mentioned again in Exodus 34:18-23, Leviticus 23:6-8, 15-22, 33-43; and Deuteronomy 16:1-17

**“three times a year.”** The importance of the three core pilgrimage feasts is emphasized by the fact that God says on several occasions that every Israelite male was to appear before Him at these three feasts (Exod. 23:14, 17; 34:23-24; Deut. 16:16). Of course if all the men left their homes and traveled to wherever the Tabernacle was set up, and later to Jerusalem after the Temple was built, that would leave their lands and families in a very vulnerable position. But God promised that He would protect the Israelites if they would obey Him and go to the three Feasts each year (Exod. 34:24).

For more information and a more complete list of the feasts and sabbaths in Israel, see commentary on Leviticus 23:2.

Exd 23:15

**“Abib.”** The first month of the religious year at this time (the first month of the civil calendar was Tishri). Abib was later also called Nisan.

**“And no one is to appear before me empty-handed.”** This is stated again in Exodus 34:20. When a person came to the Tabernacle/Temple for one of the pilgrimage feasts, he was to bring an offering. Although what was to be offered is not specified in the Torah, through the centuries, the rabbis described different offerings that were to be brought. Today, we approach God with the “offering” of our confession of Jesus Christ, and on that basis, God accepts us.

Exd 23:16

**“And the Feast of Harvest, the firstfruits...And the Feast of Ingathering at the end of the year.”** There are two feasts in this verse, and both are harvest feasts, one called the “Feast of Harvest” and the other called the “Feast of Ingathering.” The Feast of Harvest here in Exodus 23:16 is also called the “the Feast of Weeks” (Exod. 34:22; Deut. 16:10) and the “Day of Firstfruits” (Num. 28:26), and in the New Testament it was called “Pentecost” (Acts 2:1).

The Hebrew word translated “harvest” is *qatsiyr* (#07105 קָצִיר), which means “harvest,” whereas the Hebrew word translated “ingathering” is *'aciyph* (#0614 אָסִיף), and it means “ingathering” or “harvest.” The two words are synonyms in that they both refer to harvests, but it is helpful to follow the Hebrew text and translate them as two separate English words.

Traditionally, the Feast of Harvest (Pentecost) ended the wheat harvest, and wheat was the last of the grains to be harvested in Israel; it was harvested later than barley and millet. The “Feast of Harvest” was called the “Day of Firstfruits” because it was a one-day feast, in contrast to the Feast of Unleavened Bread, which was a seven-day feast, and the “Feast of Booths,” which was a seven-day feast but to which an eighth day was added.

The second feast here in Exodus 23:16 is the “Feast of Ingathering,” which is also called the “Feast of Booths” in other places in the Bible (often less correctly known by the name “Feast of Tabernacles”). It ended up being an eight-day feast that went from Tishri 15-22.

**“at the end of the year.”** The end of the harvest, in the month Tishri, the seventh month, was not the “end of the year.” It was the end of the regular harvest season. There were still technically five more months until the end of the calendar year, which ended in the month of Adar.

**“when you gather in your labors out of the field.”** In this sentence, “labors” is put by the figure of speech metonymy for what is produced by labor, which is grain, vegetables, and fruit. If the sentence were written without the metonymy, it would read something like, “when you gather in from the field the crops that your labor has produced.”

Exd 23:17

**“Three times in the year all your males are to appear before the Lord.”** The importance of the three pilgrimage feasts is emphasized by the fact that God says several times that every Israelite male was to appear before Him at these three feasts (Exod. 23:14, 17; 34:23-24; Deut. 16:16), (see commentary on Exod. 23:14).

Exd 23:18

**“Do not offer the blood of my sacrifice with leavened bread.”** Exodus 23:18 needs to be understood in light of its context, which is the three pilgrimage feasts: the Feast of Unleavened Bread, the Feast of Harvest, and the Feast of Ingathering (see commentary on Exod. 23:14). The rabbis understood this command to be about the Passover and Feast of Unleavened Bread. No one who was participating in any way with the Passover sacrifice was to have any leaven or leavened bread in their possession before the Passover Lamb was killed. Thus, there was no leaven or leavened bread around when the blood of the Passover Lamb was shed.

In the original Passover, which occurred in Egypt, people sacrificed the Passover lamb (or goat) in their own houses. But that stopped when God chose a place to be worshiped. Then people sacrificed at the Tabernacle/Temple. The families could accompany the men if they could and wanted to, but otherwise, the Passover was celebrated by the men who traveled to the Tabernacle/Temple. However, that changed again, not by God’s command but by popular action, when the Temple was burned and people were exiled to foreign lands. Then, once again, people started sacrificing the Passover in their homes. But that apparently stopped again, or mostly stopped again, when the Temple was built in Jerusalem.

**“nor is the fat of my feast to remain all night until the morning.”** This is a more specific restatement of what God said in Exodus 12:10, that none of the Passover Lamb was to be allowed to remain until morning. Any part of it that was not eaten was to be burned up. Exodus 23:18 continues to clarify what God wants, which is that even the fat was to be burned up, even though the fat was not generally eaten anyway (Lev. 3:17).

**“feast.”** This is the Hebrew word that refers to a pilgrimage feast.

**“remain all night.”** This phrase is one verb in the Hebrew texts. In Exodus 12:10, none of the Passover lamb or goat (Exod. 12:5) was to remain through the night.

Exd 23:19

**“The best of the firstfruits of your ground you are to bring.”** God started giving His laws to Israel in Exodus 20:2, and Exodus 23:19 is the last law that He gave in this first set of laws, and these laws were written in a book called “the Book of the Covenant” (Exod. 24:4, 7).

The “firstfruits” are mentioned earlier, in Exodus 23:16.

**“into the house of Yahweh.”** At this point neither the Tabernacle nor the Temple existed, so this verse anticipates the building of them. Israel did not plant or harvest during the wilderness wanderings, they lived off manna, so there were no “firstfruits of the ground” to bring to God.

**“You must not boil a young goat in its mother’s milk.”** This phrase occurs three times in the Torah (Exod. 23:19; 34:26; and Deut. 14:21). Umberto Cassuto writes: “...*you shall not boil a kid in it its mother’s milk* according to the heartless custom that they [the Canaanites] practice on their festival of first-fruits. Maimonides already conjectured that the prohibition of boiling a kid in its mother’s milk was intended to keep the Israelites away from the idolatrous customs, but he had no proof that the Gentiles actually practiced such things. Now we know from the Ugaritic texts that the Canaanites prepared such a dish, particularly at festal ceremonies pertaining to the fertility of the soil.”[[48]](#footnote-21847)

The fact that God repeated this command three times shows the influence that the Canaanite culture that surrounded Israel had on them. To remain godly, the Israelites had to have soft hearts that were obedient to God. That turned out to be easier said than done. The Israelites were led into the pagan worship of other gods, which involved many hard-hearted practices, including things like child sacrifice (e.g., 2 Chron. 28:3). In contrast to the cold-hearted and demonic celebrations and practices of pagan cultures, God’s commands exude love and mercy. The mother’s milk was designed to bring life, but the demonic world turns that blessing into a curse and the milk brings death.

Exd 23:20

**“Behold, I am going to send an angel.”** God gave to Israel His law and regulations (Exod. 20:2-23:19), and now He gives them promises and warnings connected with obeying the law, which will then be in force when Israel agrees to the law and makes a covenant with God to be faithful to Him and keep it, which they do (Exod. 24:3-8).

That God sent an “angel” is disputed by some scholars (particularly the Jewish rabbis), because the word for “angel” is also the word for “messenger.” But there seems to be good evidence in the text that this was an angel, not a human messenger. This angel was going to bring Israel into the Promised Land, which Moses did not (Exod. 23:23). Also, the angel cannot be Moses, because the angel was to go ahead of Moses (Exod. 32:34). There is no other human messenger that is mentioned in the text that could lead Israel and be followed by Moses, so the best understanding is that this “angel” is in fact an angel.

Exd 23:21

**“my name is in him.”** This is a common idiom, where “name” refers to authority. We baptize or pray in the “name” of Jesus Christ, meaning in his authority. God had given this angel authority to carry out his task and rebellion against the angel was rebellion against God.

Exd 23:22

**“listen, yes, listen.”** This repetition of the verb in two different inflections is the figure of speech polyptoton, which is used for emphasis. In this case, the first verb “listen” is an infinitive and the second verb is an imperfect verb. The emphasis could be understood as saying, “If you will really listen.” Some versions translate the verb as “obey,” because that is the meaning of the verb in many contexts because really listening results in obeying.

**“listen, yes, listen to his voice.”** The “his voice” refers to the voice of the angel that will go before Israel in their travel (cf. Exod. 23:20-22).

**“do all that I speak, then I.”** God is speaking in the first person.

Exd 23:23

**“the Amorite.”** The word is singular, referring to the whole nation of the Amorites, and the same goes for the other pagan nations. The nations that inhabited the Promised Land and the Transjordan are often listed in different ways, with different numbers. For example, in Deuteronomy 7:1, God lists seven nations. Six of them are here in Exodus 23:23, and the nation that is left out of this list is the Girgashites.

**“wipe them out.”** See 2 Chron. 32:21.

Exd 23:24

**“bow down.”** The common biblical way of bowing down before people or God was to fall to one’s knees and bow the upper body to the earth. It is the same Hebrew word as “worship.”

[For more on bowing down, see Word Study: “Worship.”]

**“nor serve them.”** Gods require a lot of work and attention. There is usually an altar that requires a supply of wood, washing things that require water to be carried (lots of water!), animals to tend, things to clean, rituals to attend, and much more, including, if the god required ritual sex, there was ritual prostitution. The Levites took care of the work for God’s Tabernacle, but it would be easy for Israelites to get caught up in the worship of other gods. After all, if you really believed in them then you could feel especially good about yourself because of all the work you were doing in serving the god or goddess..

**“but you must tear, yes, tear them down.”** God has no tolerance for idols. The idols are to be torn down. They are harmful in many different ways. See commentary on Deuteronomy 7:5.

***“sacred*** **standing-stones.”** It was a common practice, especially among the Canaanite cultures, to take stones, natural or with some shaping, and set them upright as a part of the recognition and worship of a god, or to set them up as a cultic memorial of some event. God commanded Israel to destroy those stones, but given all the ones that have been uncovered by archeologists, apparently often that did not happen.

[For more on standing-stones, see commentary on Gen. 28:18. For more on idols being harmful, see commentary on Deut. 7:5.]

Exd 23:25

**“he will bless.”** This seems to refer to the angel who will go ahead of Israel in their marches (Exod. 23:20).

Exd 23:26

**“I will fulfill the number of your days.”** This is an idiomatic way of saying that people will not die of untimely deaths, but will live long lives.

Exd 23:27

**“I will send my terror before you.”** This is an idiomatic way of saying that God would find ways to terrify the Canaanites so that, when Israel arrived in the Promised Land, the Canaanites would turn and flee from them.

**“throw into a panic.”** See commentary on Joshua 10:10.

Exd 23:28

**“I will send the hornet before you.”** Although there may have been some hornets, considering that there is no mention of any literal hornets in Joshua or Judges, it is more likely that “hornet” is being used idiomatically for something that people are afraid of. In that sense, “hornet” is like the word “terror” in the previous verse, Exodus 23:27.

Umberto Cassuto writes: “The hornet, which is also mentioned in Deuteronomy 7:20 and Joshua 24:12, is nothing but unreasoning dread, panic, synonymous with the word for terror (a repetition of the thought in different words…). This is apparently the correct interpretation of hornet, for the Arabs to this day call panic resulting in mass flight by a word signifying ‘hornet.’”[[49]](#footnote-28279)

Exd 23:29

**“desolate.”** In this context, the Hebrew word refers to being uninhabited by people. The fact that the animals could multiply and be a danger to the Israelites shows that the lions and bears that were in Israel at the time of David (and likely leopards and such as well), were there earlier, for example in the time of Joshua. The lions were made extinct in Israel by the Romans, who captured them and used them in gladiator games.

Exd 23:30

**“increased *in number*.”** The Hebrew for this phrase is more literally, “become fruitful.” Scholars generally take this as a reference to becoming more numerous. For example, the CSB reads, “I will drive them out little by little ahead of you until you have become numerous….”

**“inherited the land.”** The Hebrew word translated “inherited” is *nachal* (#05157 נָחַל), and it can refer to taking possession of something or inheriting something. The two meanings are related because a person has to take possession of something that he has inherited. However, for our modern understanding, it seems better to say “inherited” than “possessed” because “possessed” may imply that the land was not Israel’s and they just took it by force, which is not the whole story. As the psalmist says, “The earth is Yahweh’s, and all it contains; the world, and those who dwell in it” (Ps. 24:1). God created the earth, and He gave the Promised Land, Israel, to Abraham for him and his descendants, including the Messiah. Tribes of people who did not worship God took control of the land, but it was God’s and He gave it to Israel. However, because of the tribes who were living there and that they did not recognize God’s sovereignty, Israel had to “inherit” the land by force and take it from the Canaanite tribes.

Exd 23:31

**“I will give the inhabitants of the land into your hand, and you are to drive them out before you.”** This is a wonderful example of how God and His people have to cooperate in bringing God’s will to pass. God would give the land to Israel, but they still had to fight to inherit it. God gives gifts and callings to people, but they still have to exert an effort to bring those gifts and callings into fruition.

Exd 23:32

**“make a covenant with them.”** God said this several times (see commentary on Deut. 7:2). This verse graphically shows that the “gods” of the pagan nations were not just idols of wood and stone, but they represented and were likely occasionally inhabited by the “gods” (the demons) that they represented. In some cases, the demons would come into concretion in various forms. Witches and psychics report seeing spirits in various forms, and a sizeable percentage of people on earth today believe in “ghosts,” and many people claim to have actually seen a spirit or a ghost.

Folk legends tell of people “making a deal with the Devil.” That is actually a reality, not a legend; people do “make a deal” (a covenant of sorts) with the Devil. It happens today, and it has happened for millennia. So when the Bible says, “Do not make a covenant...with their gods,” those are not “empty words,” they are a stern warning not to get involved with the demons who are represented by the pagan gods. The Devil and his minions only come to steal, kill, and destroy (John 10:10) and nothing good ever comes from getting involved with them.

Exd 23:33

**“Indeed, you will serve their gods.”** It is a sad testimony about God’s people that many of them willingly participate in activities that involve other gods. Sometimes people take a “both-and” approach and worship Yahweh and other gods, and sometimes people turn away from God completely. In any case, God knows human nature so well He said that if you let these pagan idols hang around, then eventually you will worship them, and that is exactly what happened.

**Exodus Chapter 24**

Exd 24:1

**“He said to Moses, “Come up to Yahweh.”** If not read carefully in context this verse can be confusing because it sounds like God is calling Moses to go up Mount Sinai. But Moses is already up Mount Sinai; he went up for the fourth time in Exodus 20:21. So this command here in Exodus 24:1 came during Moses’ fourth time up Mount Sinai to be with Yahweh (see commentary on Exod. 20:21). God is telling Moses to come up again, but only part way, and bring Aaron, Nadab, and Abihu, and 70 of the elders of Israel along too. But those men were down at the foot of the mountain, so Moses had to go down again to get those men and bring them part way up with them. So Moses went back down to get them (Exod. 24:3) and brought them partway up Mount Sinai as God asked him to do (Exod. 24:9).

That Moses was still up on Mount Sinai when God told him to bring Aaron and the other men part way up the mountain would have been much clearer if Exodus 24:1 had not been made into a new chapter. This is one of the many places in the Bible where the chapter division is put in a place that makes the Bible difficult and confusing to read. The chapter divisions and verse divisions were added to the Bible by people who lived many hundreds of years after the Bible text itself was written down.

[For more on Moses’ seven trips up Mount Sinai, see commentary on Exod. 19:3.]

**“Aaron, Nadab, and Abihu.”** That is, Aaron and his two oldest sons. For an unstated reason, Aaron’s. younger sons, Eliazar and Ithamar, did not go up.

**“bow down.”** The common biblical way of bowing down before people or God was to fall to one’s knees and bow the upper body to the earth. It is the same Hebrew word as “worship.”

[For more on bowing down, see Word Study: “Worship.”]

Exd 24:3

**“Then Moses went *down*.”** Exodus 24:3 is Moses’ fourth time down Mount Sinai. Moses came down Mount Sinai to the camp of Israel at the foot of the mountain and told all the people what God said, which was all the laws and commandments God had given from Exodus 20:21, when he had gone up Mount Sinai to speak with God (his fourth time up Mount Sinai) until this fourth time down the mountain (Exod. 24:3). Moses wrote down all the things that God had said during his fourth time on the mountain, (Exod. 24:4), and that scroll of laws that God gave to Moses was called “The Book of the Covenant” (Exod. 24:7). Moses went back up Mount Sinai for the fifth time in Exodus 24:13. It was on the fifth time up that Moses got the first set of the Ten Commandments written upon tablets, but he broke them.

[For more information on Moses’ seven trips up Mount Sinai, see commentary on Exod. 19:3.]

**“and told the people all the words of Yahweh and all the ordinances.”** God had said a lot in the 40 days that Moses was up on Mount Sinai for the fourth time (Exod. 20:21-24:3). Moses wrote down the laws and ordinances that God had spoken (Exod. 24:4), and called that scroll, “The Book of the Covenant” (Exod. 24:7) because those laws were the ones the Israelites agreed to keep when they made the covenant with God that we refer to as the “Old Covenant” (or the “Old Testament”).

The laws in the Book of the Covenant, which was what God had said from Exodus 20:22-23:33, are very valuable moral and legal directives on many different aspects of life, and if followed would keep any nation and its people holy before Yahweh and well-positioned to have rewards in the next life. There are parts of it that seem very harsh to us today, but we must remember that on the Day of Judgment, we humans will not make the laws by which we will be judged, God made those laws. There is a spiritual war going on between Good and Evil, and the Devil’s goal is to steal, kill, and destroy God’s people (John 10:10). Most ungodly people today conveniently don’t believe in the Devil and his agenda to make people and nations unholy to God, but their unbelief does not make the Devil disappear, it only distorts their perception of how life really works and what is important. What people believe will not change what God will do on the Day of Judgment. Also, although we may not have to enforce every one of the laws in the Book of the Covenant today, we must realize that only a few of the people of Israel had God’s gift of spirit (cf. Num. 11:16-17, 24-29). Therefore, the most reliable way to keep Israel holy before Yahweh was to give people clear laws on how to live holy before God and get the truly unholy people out of Israel because their evil influence would make it unholy to God and also jeopardize the everlasting life and rewards that people could have in the future. Any Israelite who did not like God’s laws was free to leave Israel and go to another country, but if they were stubborn and stayed in Israel they would be subject to God’s laws, just as any foreigner who wanted to live in Israel became subject to God’s laws (Num. 15:15-16).

[For more information on Moses’ seven trips up Mount Sinai, see commentary on Exod. 19:3.]

Exd 24:4

**“Moses wrote all the words of Yahweh.”** Moses wrote down all the laws and regulations that God had spoken from Exodus 20:2-23:19. He would have included the Ten Commandments because God had not written them on tablets yet. Moses wrote a fairly small scroll, which was called “the Book of the Covenant” (Exod. 24:7), and it contained all the laws and regulations that God had spoken in Exodus 20:2-23:19. These laws were what Israel agreed to obey when they made their first covenant (the “Old Covenant”) with God. It was a blood covenant, and half the blood was put on God’s altar and half was sprinkled on the people (Exod. 24:6-8).

**“at the foot of the mountain.”** The Hebrew text literally reads, “under” or “beneath” the mountain, but it means “at the foot of.” Saying “under the mountain” would be unclear in English. Here in Exodus 24:3-8, at the foot of Mount Sinai, the Israelites made a blood covenant with God that He would be their God and they would be His people and obey Him. But then just 40 days later Moses broke the tablets that had the Ten Commandments on them in the same place that Israel made the covenant only 40 days earlier (Exod. 32:9). The tablets with the Ten Commandments represented the covenant Israel made with God, and when Moses saw how openly and boldly Israel broke their newly-made covenant with God, he broke the tablets that represented the covenant.

***“*standing-stones.”** It was a common practice to take a very large, long stone and set it upright as recognition of memorial of some event.

[For more on standing-stones, see commentary on Gen. 28:18.]

Exd 24:5

**“sacrificed peace offerings.”** The regulations for a peace offering are mainly given in Leviticus 3:1-17 and Leviticus 7:11-21. When a peace offering was made, the priests and people got to eat the meat, while the fat and some other innards were burned on the altar. The priests got the breast and the right thigh (Lev. 7:15, 31-34), which left the rest of the meat for the people who brought the sacrifice. Eating the meat of the sacrifice there at the site of the Tabernacle/Temple while God was consuming part of the sacrifice (burned up on the altar) was having a fellowship meal with God and was a graphic way of worshiping God (or the god or gods) and showing your connection to Him (or them). Eating fellowship meals like that was part of the worship of both Yahweh and many pagan gods.

**“of bulls.”** The Hebrew word translated as “bull” is *par* (#06499 פַּר or פָּר). It gets translated as “bull” (or “oxen”) in some English versions, and “young bulls” in some other English versions, especially the older versions. There does not seem to be any solid evidence that these animals were “young” bulls. The Brown, Driver, Briggs, Hebrew-English Lexicon, done in 1906, has “young bull” as a definition, but the much more modern *HALOT* Hebrew-English lexicon does not. Interestingly, the NASB 1977 and 1995 editions had “young bulls” but the updated NASB2020 just has “bulls.” So it appears that as the corpus of literature that contributed to our understanding of the Old Testament grew, it became more apparent that “bulls” was a better translation than “young bulls.” Also, the word “bulls” can include both younger and older bulls.

Exd 24:6

**“he threw on the altar.”** The Hebrew verb translated as “threw” is *zaraq* (#02236 זָרַק), which means “to toss or throw (in a volume), scatter abundantly, disperse.”[[50]](#footnote-11767) It does not seem that Moses sprinkled the blood. There is a common Hebrew word for “sprinkle,” and it is not used here, but is used in other contexts (e.g., Exod. 29:21; Lev. 4:6). It is likely what he did was more like splattered the blood on the people. In any case, exactly how Moses got the blood on the people is not known. Did he use just his hand or did he use something like a hyssop branch? The Bible does not tell us that, so apparently it was not important to God that we know that. What was important to know is that the blood was put on the people, and it would have stained their clothes and been a reminder of the covenant they had made with Yahweh.

Exd 24:7

**“Book of the Covenant.”** The Scroll of the Covenant, often called “the Book of the Covenant,” was the initial part of what we today refer to as “the Old Covenant” or “Old Testament.” It included the Ten Commandments that God had spoken in a loud voice to the people (Exod. 20:1-17) and all the various laws God had Moses write down that God had spoken to Moses in Exodus 21-23. Thus, the whole “scroll of the covenant” basically covered the laws in Exodus 20-23, or about four chapters. It was this scroll of the covenant that was read to the people of Israel, which they agreed to obey when they made the “Old Covenant” and were sprinkled with the blood of the sacrifices (Exod. 24:5-8). Later, as Exodus-Deuteronomy was given by God and written down, what we know as the Torah, the Law (more accurately, “the Instruction”) expanded beyond those four chapters, but those four chapters capture a good part of the heart and reason for the Law.

The scroll of the covenant contains the very essence of the “Law,” which is *torah* in Hebrew (hence it is often referred to as the “Torah”). It is somewhat unfortunate that the Hebrew word *torah* became translated and generally understood as meaning “law,” because actually, it means “instruction.” Anyone who has been to a legal library in the United States knows that it contains thousands of volumes of “laws.” There is no way that all the individual laws of a society could be written in so few pages as the Law of Moses. The “Law” of Moses is not actually all the “law” of Israel, it is only a small portion of laws, but they act as “instruction” for how to model the laws of a society. The Ten Commandments and Exodus 21-23 are a very solid basis for how to build a godly society.

Because the people agreed to obey the words of Yahweh, and because the other commandments in the Mosaic Law were based upon what was written in the scroll of the covenant, the other commandments in Law are also considered part of the Law and the Old Covenant. The Rabbis teach that the Mosaic Law has a total of 613 commandments.

It is worth noting that when Israel made the “Old Covenant” with God, the Ten Commandments had been spoken by God audibly and written down by Moses. Only after Israel made the Old Covenant with God did Moses go up Mount Sinai and get the Ten Commandments on stone (Exod. 31:18).

**“be obedient.”** The Hebrew text has the word *shama*, (#08085 שָׁמַע), which means “hear, listen, obey.” It is the same word that occurs in the Shema (Deut. 6:4), “Hear, O Israel, Yahweh is our God, Yahweh alone.” Whether the best translation of *shama* is “hear” or “obey” depends on the context.

Exd 24:8

**“threw it on the people.”** “The people” here refers to the representatives of the people, not all the millions of Israelites. Nevertheless, there would have been lots of people involved. This was the blood part of the blood covenant that we know as the “Old Covenant,” usually, but less accurately, known as the “Old Testament.” God expected the people to know and follow the covenant that they had agreed to, and here we can see one reason why. When the people agreed to obey God, and entered into a covenant with Him, animals were killed, and their blood was sprinkled on both God and the people (Exod. 24:6, 8). This would have been a very memorable event, and it is likely that the bloodstains of that covenant were on the clothes of many people for a long time. Furthermore, this event was then to be spoken of from generation to generation, which is why, many hundreds of years later, the prophets were still reminding the Israelites about the covenant (cf. Isa. 24:5; Jer. 11:10; Ezek. 44:7; Hos. 8:1).

**“This is the blood of the covenant.”** There are times in the Old Testament when this covenant, which is commonly known as “the Old Covenant” is implied to be a marriage covenant. That shows up in different ways in the Old Testament. For example, in Jeremiah 31:32, God says that because He made that covenant with Israel, He was a “husband” to them. Also, Israel’s worship of other gods besides Yahweh is referred to as adultery (cf. Jer. 3:8; Hos. 1:2), and when God finally leaves Israel, He speaks of giving her a bill of divorce (Isa. 50:1; Jer. 3:8). Also, there seems to be a parallel between Exodus 32:20 and Numbers 5:11-31. In Numbers 5, a wife suspected of being unfaithful has to drink water mixed with dust from the floor of the Tabernacle, and in Exodus 32, Moses ground the golden calf to powder, mixed it with water, and made Israel drink it.

Here in Exodus, the blood was shed to make a new covenant (see commentary on Luke 22:20).

Exd 24:9

**“and 70 of the elders of Israel went up.”** Moses and some of the main leaders of Israel went partway up Mount Sinai. They did not go all the way up the mountain, only far enough to see that God was indeed on the mountain (Exod. 24:1-2, 9-11). They went up in obedience to God’s command in Exodus 24:1 (see commentary on Exod. 24:1 and 24:3).

[For more information on Moses’ seven trips up Mount Sinai, see commentary on Exod. 19:3.]

Exd 24:10

**“They saw the God of Israel.”** The Hebrew word “saw” is the common verb *ra'ah* (#07200 רָאָה), to see with the physical eye. This is different from the word for “saw” in the next verse, Exodus 24:11. There “beheld” refers to seeing with the mental eye (see commentary on Exod. 24:11).

**“lapis lazuli.”** The deep blue color of lapis lazuli—a stone that was well-known in the ancient Near East—was often associated with God and his throne (Exod. 24:10; Job. 28:16; Isa. 54:11; Ezek. 1:26; 10:1). The majority English translation, “sapphire,” is almost certainly wrong (see commentary on Ezek. 1:26). It has been suggested that the lapis lazuli represented the blue sky, and symbolized God sitting on the sky above. It is an interesting suggestion, but there's no way to verify it.

**“like the skies for purity.”** The Hebrew word translated “purity” is *ṭōhar* (#02892 טֹהַר), and it can refer to something being clear or pure. Although many English versions have “clearness” or “clarity,” that does not seem to be the best translation in this context. Lapis lazuli is not “clear” (neither are most blue sapphires), but it can be a pure dark blue in the same way that the sky on a cloudless day is a beautiful pure light blue. We can be assured that the stones that God used around His throne were “pure,” without occlusions or discolorations.

Exd 24:11

**“lay his hand on.”** This is an idiom meaning “to harm.” God did not harm these leaders even though they saw him.

**“they beheld God.”** The Hebrew word “beheld” is the verb *chazah* (#02372 חָזָה), to see, but often to perceive, to see with the mental eye. When contrasted with Exodus 24:11, *chazah* means more to mentally perceive. The leaders of Israel saw Yahweh with their eyes (Exod. 24:10) and understood what they saw (Exod. 24:11).

**“and ate and drank.”** The mention of eating and drinking is important and sets some biblical precedents. One thing it shows is that God is a God of abundance, and He will care for His people. He feeds people here in the wilderness. Similarly, there will be banquets and plenty of food when Christ sets up his kingdom on earth and rules the earth (e.g. Isa. 25:6; Matt. 8:11; Rev. 19:9). It also reflects the fact that when a person worshiped a god and sacrificed to the god there was often a fellowship meal that accompanied the sacrifice; part of the meat of the sacrifice was eaten by the people (cf. Lev. 7:15-20; 1 Sam. 1:4-5; Prov. 7:14). In this case, although these men had not brought a specific sacrifice, God provided the food for a fellowship meal with Him. In this case, and very importantly, this fellowship meal was eaten while the people were genuinely fellowshipping with God—the God they saw right there, not some representation or idol or “empty Tabernacle room” where God was supposed to dwell. These people “saw God” and ate and drank freely and safely in His presence. This prefigures the future time when God’s people will live safely in His presence and freely drink of the water of life (Rev. 21:3-6). Also, this experience should have put to rest the superstition that if a person saw God they would die (e.g., Judg. 13:22), but it did not.

Exd 24:12

**“and remain there.”** We know from Exodus 24:18 that Moses was there on Mount Sinai for 40 days and 40 nights, and that was when he got the revelation about the building and services of the Tabernacle.

Exd 24:13

**“and Moses went *farther* up onto the mountain of God.”** Moses was already part way up the mountain with Aaron, Nadab, Abihu, and 70 of the elders of Israel, but they all went back down while Moses went farther up the mountain and could not be seen by the people at the base of Mount Sinai.

Exd 24:14

**“Wait for us until we return to you.”** This did not mean “Wait here on the mountain.” It meant, “Keep the camp here at Mount Sinai until we return.” Moses did not want the Israelites packing up and leaving the area. We know the men all went back down because Aaron participated in the making of the golden calf, which happened at the base of the mountain.

Exd 24:15

**“And Moses went up on the mountain.”** This is Moses’ fifth time up Mount Sinai to be with God. First, he walked up close to the cloud that covered the mountain, then after six days of waiting there, he walked into the cloud where God was (Exod. 24:13-18). This fifth time Moses was on Mount Sinai lasted 40 days and 40 nights (v. 18), and it was during that time that God gave Moses all the detailed revelation about how to build the Tent of Meeting (the “Tabernacle”). Moses did not come down the mountain until Exodus 32:15, so God gave Moses more than seven chapters of detailed information about the Tent of Meeting. But even those seven chapters are not all the information God gave Moses, because there is not enough detail in those chapters to completely construct Moses’ Tent of Meeting, and archaeologists and architects have been arguing about exactly how it should be constructed for years.

In general, there is so much focus on the fact that Moses got the Ten Commandments on stone tablets on this trip up Mount Sinai that no one pays attention to the real reason Moses made this trip and was gone so long—which was to get the details of the Tent of Meeting! The people already had the Ten Commandments and more than three chapters of laws from God. What they did not have was a proper dwelling place for God to live among them, and the Tent of Meeting provided that. But the Tent of Meeting provided so much more than just a “tent” where God could live and meet the people of Israel. Everything about the Tent of Meeting was redemptive, symbolic, or taught a lesson. The size, the shape, the colors, the material and metals used—everything was important. Furthermore, much of the symbolism pointed to the work of Christ and the need for his life and work. The very fact that the walls and curtains of the Tent of Meeting separated God from the people showed the great need for the work of Christ to reconcile God and people back together. The people could not see over the tall outer courtyard curtains that enclosed the Tent of Meeting and the things in its courtyard, and curtains in front of the Holy Place and Holy of Holies ensured that the people never could see the dwelling place of the Most High God. Indeed, without the work of Christ, humankind would never see God or be redeemed and as a race would be doomed to everlasting death. No wonder God was so picky about every detail of the Tent of Meeting—those details pointed to His Son and the eventual restoration of the human race that God created and loved.

[For more information on Moses’ seven trips up Mount Sinai, see commentary on Exod. 19:3. For more on God speaking directly to Israel with a loud voice from the top of Mount Sinai, see commentary on Exod. 19:9.]

Exd 24:16

**“The glory of Yahweh settled on Mount Sinai.”** God was in the middle of the glory, which is why He called out from the middle of “the cloud,” which was not a normal cloud, but the cloud of light that surrounded God. This “cloud” covered the Tabernacle and was inside it (Exod. 40:35-36) and also filled the Temple (1 Kings 8:10-11; 2 Chron. 5:13-14). This “cloud” around God was similar to what Ezekiel saw (Ezek. 10:4; see commentary on Ezek. 1:4). In this context, “the glory of Yahweh” was the glorious light that surrounded Him.

[For more on “the glory of Yahweh,” see commentary on Ezek. 1:28.]

**“and the cloud covered it six days.”** No specific reason is given for why God waited on Mount Sinai for six days before calling Moses into His presence in the cloud. The cloud of God’s presence covered Mount Sinai and Moses went into the cloud, into the presence of God (Exod. 24:19). This is parallel in some ways to the Transfiguration of Christ (Matt. 17:1-9; Mark 9:2-9; Luke 9:28-36). In the Transfiguration, Jesus was on the mountain with Peter, James, and John, and was transformed with them watching, and a “bright cloud” (Matt. 17:5) formed over them (Mark 9:7; Luke 9:34). That cloud indicated God’s presence, and God spoke to them out of the cloud, just like God spoke to the Israelites out of the cloud on top of Mount Sinai and God spoke to Ezekiel out of the cloud of brightness that surrounded Him (Ezek. 1:4, 27-2:1).

Exd 24:18

**“And Moses was on the mountain 40 days and 40 nights.”** On this fifth trip up Mount Sinai, Moses was there for 40 days and nights, and he was there 40 days and nights again on his seventh trip up the mountain (Exod. 34:28). Both times he was on the mountain for 40 days and nights were the times he got the Ten Commandments written on stone tablets.

**Exodus Chapter 25**

Exd 25:4

**“scarlet.”** This is a scarlet, a variation of the color red (sometimes referred to as a “worm,” see commentary on Ps. 22:6).

Exd 25:5

**“rams’ skins dyed red.”** The Hebrew text is more literally, “rams’ skins made red.” The versions are divided on exactly how the skins are “made red.” Some of the English versions read “dyed red,” which is possible (e.g. ASV, CEB, CSB, KJV, NAB, NASB, NET, NIV), and some of them read something such as “tanned rams’ skins” (e.g., CJB, ESV, JPS, NLT, NRSV, REB), because the process of tanning made the skins more reddish.

**“dugongs.”** Dugongs are very similar to manatees but live in the Red Sea and Gulf of Aqaba (cf. HCSB: “manatee skins”). The Hebrew word is *tachash* (#08476 תַּחַשׁ), and the meaning is disputed. Likely possibilities include leather from Egypt, seal skins, and the skin of dugongs. We favor dugongs for several different reasons.

God gave the instructions to Moses when they were near Sinai, so they would have been in the desert, but the Red Sea and Gulf of Aqaba were fairly close by. In order not to have to piece an immense number of skins together, the leather pieces would have had to be of large size. An adult dugong is about 10 feet long (over 3 meters), and fat around, so a single skin would cover a lot of area. This may also explain why the Tent of Meeting, which was very large, was to be covered by a number of skins (the word *tachash* is plural in Exod. 25:5, 26:14, 36:19; 39:34), but apparently, it only took one skin to cover the ark of the covenant and the articles of the Tent of Meeting such as the table of the Bread of the Presence (the word *tachash* is singular in Num. 4:6, 8, 10, 11, 12 and 4:14. It is also singular in Num. 4:25, but in that case, it refers to the single large covering made of skins, not a single skin).

Another reason for favoring the dugong is that Ezekiel 16:10 mentions sandals made of that skin, and historians and customs experts tell us that the dugong “was once plentiful in the Gulf of Aqaba and until early in the last century its skin was the standard material for making sandals in the E. Sinai peninsula.[[51]](#footnote-29935)”

Another reason for thinking that the dugong is what the word *tachash* refers to is that the other possibilities seem to eliminate themselves. Although older translations say “badger’s skins,” that does not seem possible and almost no modern translation (the NKJV excepted) goes with that translation. Some translations say “goatskins,” but there is a more natural word for goatskins that it seems God would have used in the Bible if He meant goatskins, and besides, it would have taken an immense number of goats to cover the Tent of Meeting, and furthermore, a single skin could not cover the ark of the covenant or the other furniture in the Tent of Meeting.

Some translations say “seal skins,” “dolphin skins,” or “porpoise skins,” but those animals were hard to catch and therefore were rarely caught, they did not have large skins, and they were not regularly used for sandals. In contrast, the dugongs were abundant, were social and traveled (swam slowly) in groups, and were easy to hunt because they could not move fast. That leaves the second most likely possible meaning for *tachash* to be some kind of leather from Egypt, but although that is possible, it seems less likely to us than the skin of the dugong, in part because of the way God uses the singular and plural when referring to the skins that would cover the Tent of Meeting and the items such as the ark of the covenant.

Exd 25:6

**“the fragrant incense.”** The special incense that was to be used on the golden incense altar is described in Exodus 30:34-38.

Exd 25:7

**“the ephod.”** The ephod is described in more detail in Exodus 28:6-14 and Exodus 39:2-7.

**“the breastplate.”** The breastplate is described in more detail in Exodus 28:15-30 and Exodus 39:8-21.

Exd 25:8

**“They are to make a sanctuary for me.”** God had just made a blood covenant with Israel (Exod. 24:5-8) and they had agreed to obey Him, so it makes sense that He now wanted to live among them. To do that He needed them to make a holy place where He could dwell, and that dwelling place was the “Tabernacle.”

The word “tabernacle,” is a translation of the Hebrew word *mishkan* (#04908 מִשְׁכָּן), which means “dwelling place,” the place where one dwells or lives. In fact, it could be argued that “Dwelling Place” would be a more informative translation of *mishkan* than “Tabernacle” (The CEB, NJB, and Everett Fox[[52]](#footnote-22474) translate *mishkan* as “Dwelling,” but since the English word “dwelling” can be a noun or a verb depending on the context, “Dwelling Place” seems clearer). The “Tabernacle” is also called the “tent” (see commentary on Exod. 26:9), and the “Tent of Meeting” (the *'ohel mo'ed*) because it was the place where people met with God (see commentary on Exod. 27:21).

This “holy place” in Exodus 25:8 is translated as “sanctuary” in most English versions, but the Hebrew can be translated “holy place” which seems clearer in English (cf. BBE). It is also called a “sacred tent” (NIrV) and “holy sanctuary” (NLT).

**“and I will dwell among them.”** God chose Israel out of all the nations of the earth (Exod. 19:5-6) and made a blood covenant with them (Exod. 24:5-8), and so it makes sense that here in Exodus 25:8, God told the Israelites to build a holy place for Him so that He could live among them. This was an amazing privilege that Israel never really understood or appreciated. They liked it when God blessed their land and helped them win wars, but they refused to worship Him as He demanded or deserved, and in fact, time after time they turned away from Him and worshiped idols.

The history of Israel involves many twists and turns. The ark and the “Dwelling Place” (the Tabernacle) got separated (1 Sam. 4:3-11) and never got back together. King David brought the ark to Jerusalem but did not get the Tabernacle and ark back together but instead put the ark in a tent he made for it (2 Sam. 6:15-17). The tent David made was eventually replaced by the Temple that Solomon built. But eventually, the sin of Israel became so great that God abandoned His Temple (see commentary on Ezekiel 8:4), and shortly after that, the Temple was burned to the ground by the army of King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon.

Exd 25:9

**“I show you...you are to make it.”** The first “you” is singular, the second “you” is plural, i.e., “you all are to make it.”

**“the pattern of the tabernacle.”** This is the first time the “Tabernacle” is used in the Bible. The word “tabernacle,” is a translation of the Hebrew word *mishkan* (#04908 מִשְׁכָּן), which means “dwelling” or “dwelling place,” the place where one dwells or lives. In fact, it seems that “Dwelling Place” is a more informative translation of *mishkan* than “Tabernacle” (the CEB, NJB, and Everett Fox[[53]](#footnote-14828) translate *mishkan* as “Dwelling,” but since the English word “dwelling” can be a noun or a verb depending on the context, “Dwelling Place” seems clearer). The English word “tabernacle” comes from the Latin *tabernaculum*, which means “tent.” The Hebrew word *mishkan* means “dwelling place,” and the place where God chose to “dwell” was a “tent” among His people, which in English we call the “Tabernacle.”

In Exodus 25:8 God said that Israel was to make a holy place for Him so that He could dwell among them, and that place was the “*mishkan*,” the “Dwelling” (the “Tabernacle”). Israel had gone down into Egypt as a large family, the family of Jacob, but many years later they came out of Egypt as a nation. God chose Israel out of all the nations of the earth (Exod. 19:5-6) and made a blood covenant with them (Exod. 24:5-8) that they would be His people and He would be their God. Since God was going to be Israel’s God and Israel was going to be God’s special people, He told them to build a holy place for Him so He could live among them (Exod. 25:8). Then God spent seven chapters (Exod. 25-31) giving Israel various details about how to build His “Dwelling Place” (the Tabernacle) and how the priests were to serve Him.

Many of the details of how the Tabernacle was constructed are in the Bible, but some seemingly important ones are not. For example, the Bible never specifically says how long and how wide the tabernacle itself was (see commentary on Exod. 26:1).

The “Tabernacle” is also called the “tent” (see commentary on Exod. 26:9), and the “Tent of Meeting” (the *'ohel mo'ed*) because it was the place where people met with God (see commentary on Exod. 27:21).

**“furnishings.”** In this context, “furnishings” is an inclusive word. It includes the furniture, such as the table of the Bread of the Presence, and also the things that were necessary to carry out the ministry of the Tabernacle, such as containers for oil, etc.

Exd 25:10

**“ark.”** The very first thing God talks to Moses about building for His “Dwelling Place” (the Tabernacle; the Tent of Meeting) is the “ark of the covenant,” also called “the ark of the testimony” (Exod. 25:22; 26:33; 30:6; etc.). The ark is called those names because inside it were the tablets on which God had personally written the Ten Commandments, which were the heart and essence of the covenant between Israel and God. Without that covenant agreement, God did not have a special relationship with Israel—they would have been like any other nation on earth, just doing whatever they wanted. The covenant relationship between God and Israel was thus the very basis of everything else the Tabernacle represented, so it had to be mentioned first, before any other part of the Tabernacle was spoken about.

Although technically the “ark” was a box of wood that had been covered in gold, it had a lid referred to as the “mercy seat”

The ark of the covenant was placed inside the Tabernacle of Moses and then inside Solomon’s Temple (1 Kings 8:6). However, there will not be an ark of the covenant in the Millennial Temple because during the Millennium believers will have the law written on their hearts of flesh, not tablets of stone (see commentary on Jer. 3:16).

[For more on God wanting a “Dwelling” among Israel, see commentary on Exod. 25:8. For more on the names of the Tabernacle and what they mean, see commentary on Exod. 25:9.]

**“cubits.”** The cubit used for Moses’ Tabernacle was roughly 18 inches (45.72 centimeters). When the centimeters are given in the footnotes or text, the decimal points are usually rounded up or down depending on the fraction. For example, 45 inches, the length of the ark, is more exactly 114.3 centimeters, but the footnote gives the measure as 114. So the ark of the covenant was roughly 45 inches long, 27 inches wide, and 27 inches high.

[For more information about the cubit used in the Tabernacle, see commentary on 2 Chron. 3:3.]

**“and its height a cubit and a half.”** The ark was not just a box that sat on the ground. Apparently adding to its height was some kind of leg or “foot,” because the gold rings that were used to carry the ark were attached to the feet (Exod. 25:12). It is not known, however, whether the 1½ cubit height of the Ark included the height of the legs or not. That detail is not discussed.

Exd 25:11

**“a gold molding around it.”** As well as adding some width to the altar and being decorative, the “molding” almost certainly rose up above the top of the ark and thus acted as a kind of rim that helped keep anything that was placed on top of the ark from falling off. Everett Fox (The Schocken Bible) translates this molding as a “rim,” and it may have added a rim to the Ark.

Exd 25:12

**“and put them on its four feet.”** Although most pictures of the ark show it just as a rectangular box that sat on the ground, it apparently had feet that kept its bottom off the ground. It is not clear whether these feet were included in the calculation of the height of the ark. Robert Alter writes: “One may infer that there were actually small carved feet at the four corners so that the Ark would not rest directly on the ground.”[[54]](#footnote-11479)

**“side.”** This word is the same word that is translated as “rib” in some English Bibles in Genesis 2:21 (Adam’s “rib”).

Exd 25:15

**“they are not to be taken from it.”** Since the ark was the only thing in the Holy of Holies, there was no danger of tripping over the poles when taking care of the Tabernacle. The poles that were used to carry the pieces of furniture in the Holy Place—the menorah, the golden altar of incense, and the table of the Bread of the Presence—were taken out of the rings once those pieces of Tabernacle furniture were in place.

Exd 25:16

**“the testimony.”** The two tablets of stone on which were written the Ten Commandments. Called “the testimony” because it was a major part of the stipulations of the Old Covenant.

**“that I will give you.”** God had not given the tablets with the Ten Commandments to Moses yet; He gave them to Moses later (cf. Exod. 31:18).

Exd 25:17

**“atonement-cover.”** This is the first use of “atonement-cover” in the Bible and its composition and dimensions are described here and in Exodus 37:6-9. The Hebrew word translated as “atonement-cover” in the REV is *kapporet* (#03727 כַּפֹּרֶת). Because the Hebrew is one word, the REV translation has used the hyphenated word “atonement-cover.” Traditionally, it is called the “mercy seat.” The “atonement-cover” was the solid gold cover, or “lid,” of the ark of the covenant (the atonement-cover was not made of acacia wood covered in gold like the ark itself was). The cherubim were on top of the atonement-cover and permanently attached to it—in fact, it seems that the atonement-cover and the cherubim were made from one single piece of gold. The atonement-cover exactly fit the ark of the covenant. The ark was 2½ cubits long and 1½ cubits wide (Exod. 25:10), and so was the atonement-cover. Also, although the atonement-cover was the cover for the ark, it had its own purpose and is described apart from the ark—it is a separate piece of furniture (cf. Exod. 31:7; 35:12; 39:35; 40:20; 1 Chron. 28:11).

The traditional translation of the Hebrew text is “mercy seat,” but that is not the best translation of the Hebrew. The translation “mercy seat” is very old. Apparently, William Tyndale was the first translator to use it in an English translation, and he used it in his English translation of 1530 AD. Earlier, Martin Luther had used it in his translation (c. 1523), but Luther’s translation was in German. Early Bibles, such as Matthew’s Bible (1537), the Great Bible (1539), and the Bishops’ Bible (1568) followed Tyndale. So did the popular Geneva Bible that was used by the Pilgrims (1599), and so did the still widely used King James Version. With that history, the translation “mercy seat” became firmly embedded in the Protestant tradition, and a number of modern Bibles still use that translation. However, as translators’ knowledge of Hebrew grew, along with a willingness to depart from tradition, other translations began to appear in English Bibles. For example, “cover” (BBE, CEB, CJB, JPS, NAB, NLT, NRSV2021), “propitiatory” (Douay-Rheims, NET2014), “propitiatory covering” (LSV), “purgation cover” (Schocken Bible), “atoning cover” (NASB2020; the 1977 and 1995 versions of the NASB had read “mercy seat”), “atonement lid” (NET), and “atonement cover” (NIV, TLV). Nahum Sarna writes, “Nevertheless, ‘mercy-seat’ is not a satisfactory translation of [the Hebrew word] *kapporet*, since the aspect of ‘mercy’ is an interpretation and is not inherent in the word.”[[55]](#footnote-20637)

The translation “cover” is based on solid lexical evidence, which is why so many modern versions simply have “cover.” However, the word “atonement” is also related to “cover.” The word “atonement-cover” is formed from the same root word as the Hebrew word “cover.” “Cover” and “atonement” are related words, and so, lexically, “to atone” for sin is to “cover” it. The word “atonement” was a made-up word, an invented English word, from “at-one-ment,” and the idea of “atonement” was to cover sin and thus bring sinful humans back into a good relationship with God. The “atonement-cover” was a place where the High Priest made atonement by sprinkling animal blood on it on the Day of Atonement (Lev. 16:14-16). So although “atonement-cover” is a bit of a nuance and expansion from the Hebrew verb “cover,” in light of how the lid on the ark of the covenant functioned and in light of the connection between the Hebrew for “cover” and “atone,” the translation “atonement-cover” is an acceptable translation that also helps the reader understand its purpose, which was more than just to be a lid for the ark, it was to be a place where atonement for sin was made.

The atonement-cover had cherubim on the top, and God dwelt above the atonement-cover between the cherubim.

Exd 25:18

**“you are.”** The “you” is singular, referring to Moses. Of course, Moses would use craftsmen to do the work, but he would oversee it.

**“hammered work.”** The Hebrew is one noun, “hammered-work.”

Exd 25:19

**“From *one piece* with the atonement-cover.”** The NASB puts the words “one piece” in italics, indicating that is not actually in the text but it seems to be implied. The “one piece” is implied from the verses about the Menorah, which uses the same Hebrew wording (Exod. 25:31; cf. Exod. 25:36, which actually has the word “one”).

Exd 25:20

**“cherubim.”** This is the second time we see cherubim in the Bible. They first appeared as guards in the Garden of Eden, and now they are associated with the ark of the covenant, ostensibly to represent God’s presence and protection. They are associated with the ark both in the Tent of Meeting and the Temple (cf. Exod. 25:20; 37:9; 1 Kings 6:27; 2 Chron. 3:10, 11, 13). Here in Exodus, we learn that cherubim have wings, but it is not until Ezekiel 1 and 10 that we have a more complete description of them. They are said to be living creatures, they have four faces on their heads and four wings each, and arms and hands like human hands under their wings (see commentary on Ezek. 1:5). The hands allowed them to grasp the flaming sword mentioned in Genesis. Their powerful fast bodies had faces that looked in every direction, and their ability to carry weapons such as the sword they have in Genesis 3:24 make them formidable beings indeed. We have to remember that the description of the cherubim given in Exodus, Kings, and Chronicles was not complete, but the way God described them for us in those contexts. Ezekiel’s description was a much more detailed description of them.

**“their faces are to be *looking* toward the atonement-cover.”** The faces of the cherubim looked down, toward the atonement-cover, as if in recognition of the importance and necessity of atonement for sin.

Exd 25:21

**“the testimony.”** In this context, “the testimony” refers to the tablets with the Ten Commandments.

**“that I will give you.”** God had not given the tablets with the Ten Commandments to Moses yet; He gave them to Moses later (cf. Exod. 31:18).

Exd 25:22

**“I will meet with you there.”** This is the major reason that the Tabernacle is also referred to as “the Tent of Meeting” (e.g., Exod. 27:21; 28:43; 29:4; 30:16; 31:7).

**“from above the atonement-cover—from between the two cherubim.”** Yahweh met the people, and spoke to them, from above the atonement-cover on the ark (traditionally translated as “mercy seat”) and between the cherubim. The Hebrew prepositions “above” and “between” are in the Hebrew text.

**“I will speak to you.”** God’s voice came from between the cherubim over the atonement-cover. Numbers 7:89 says, “he [Moses] heard Yahweh’s voice speaking to him from above the atonement-cover that was on the ark of the testimony from between the two cherubim” (see commentary on Num. 7:89).

Exd 25:23

**“You are to make a table of acacia wood.”** The table of the Bread of the Presence was placed on the north side of the Tabernacle, which, because it faced east, was on the right side of the Tabernacle as you entered it from outside (Exod. 26:35). The description of the making of the table is in Exodus 37:10-16.

**“two cubits.”** That is, 36 inches (91 cm). The cubit of the Tabernacle and Temple was most likely roughly 18 inches (46 cm).

[For more information about the cubit used in the Tabernacle, see commentary on 2 Chron. 3:3.]

Exd 25:24

**“gold molding.”** See commentary on Exod. 25:11.

Exd 25:30

**“the Bread of the Presence.”** The “Bread of the Presence” was 12 huge cakes of bread that were placed on a table in the Tabernacle or Temple every week (for more on the table, see Exodus 25:23-30). The Bread of the Presence showed God’s blessing of food for His people. The Hebrew phrase is more literally, “bread of [the] face,” but the word “face” was often used to indicate one’s personal presence. An abundance of food was one of the hallmarks of God’s presence and favor. There was plenty of food in the Garden of Eden, there will be plenty of food in Christ’s future Millennial kingdom on earth, and God promised Israel that there would be an abundance of food if they obeyed Him (cf. Deut. 28:4-5, 11-12). These extremely large cakes of bread symbolized God’s blessing of food.

The Bread of the Presence in the Tabernacle consisted of 12 huge cakes of bread, like huge pancakes. Each cake was made from two-tenths of an ephah of flour. An ephah is a dry measure that is about 23 quarts (5.6 gallons; 22 liters). So two-tenths of an ephah is roughly four and a half quarts, or a little over a gallon of fine flour. So these would have been very large wheat cakes. The cakes were stacked up on the table in two separate stacks of six cakes each. (Lev. 24:5-9). The cakes were replaced every Sabbath day (Lev. 24:8; 1 Chron. 9:32), and the old bread was eaten by the priests (Lev. 24:9).

From the perspective of God looking out eastward from the inner room (the Holy of Holies) of the Tabernacle, the table with the Bread of the Presence was on the left side (the north side) of the outer room of the Tabernacle (the Holy Place). There were three articles in the Holy Place. As you entered from outside, the table with the Bread of the Presence was on your right, the menorah with its seven oil lamps was on your left, and the golden altar of incense was ahead of you in front of the curtain that led to the Holy of Holies that had the ark of the covenant in it.

[For more on Christ’s Millennial Kingdom and the blessings associated with it, including an abundance of food, see Appendix 5: “Christ’s Future Kingdom on Earth.”]

Exd 25:31

**“You are to make a menorah.”** The menorah was to be placed on the right side of the Holy Place, which, because the Tabernacle faced east, was to the south (Exod. 26:35).

**“of pure gold.”** Most things in the Tabernacle were made of acacia wood covered in gold, for example, the ark (Exod. 37:1-2), the table (Exod. 37:10-11), and the golden altar of incense (Exod. 37:25-26). But the menorah and the atonement-cover over the ark of the covenant were both made of pure gold.

Exd 25:32

**“There are to be six branches extending out from its sides.”** The menorah in the Tabernacle had seven places for oil lamps and thus seven oil lamps that went with it. Technically, a menorah is a lampstand, and the Hebrew menorah is translated as “lampstand” in many English versions. In the Tabernacle, the menorah (the “lampstand”) had seven oil lamps that were set on its six branches and its center “trunk.” The lamps were to burn from dusk to dawn every night, and part of the job of the priests was to make sure the lamp burned all night every night.

Exd 25:37

**“seven lamps.”** The menorah is a lampstand, and the “lamps” are oil lamps that sit on the branches and top of the menorah and give light to the Holy Place. The Holy Place was the larger room—the front room—in the Tabernacle that had the menorah and also had the table with the Bread of the Presence (called the “shewbread” in the KJV), and the golden altar of incense.

**“and set them up *on it.*”** That the lamps were to be set on the menorah in such a way that they best lit the inside of the Tabernacle is the most likely meaning of the Hebrew text. However, there is a possibility that the Hebrew can mean “lit” the lamps, and some English versions say that, but if that was the meaning of the text, this would be a very unusual way of saying it. The more likely idea is that the text is speaking about setting the lights on the menorah so that they light the room (cf. CEB, CJB, BBE, CSB, ESV, JPS, LSB, NAB, NASB, NJB, NIV, NRSV, RSV). This is also the case in Exodus 40:4.

The oil lamps were lit at night and snuffed out in the morning (Exod. 27:21). The text says “they give light to the space in front of it” because the menorah was close to the south wall of the Tabernacle (the left side as you walk into the Tabernacle), so the main space that was lighted by the menorah was “in front of it,” not behind it.

Exd 25:38

**“tongs.”** The meaning of the Hebrew word is debated. These “tongs” are associated with the oil lamps, so “tongs” makes sense because sometimes a coal or wick needed to be handled.

**“firepans.”** The “firepan” was a kind of shovel that was used to move and carry coals. These were likely long-handled pans that could scoop coals from the altar and that incense could then be placed on. They were almost portable altars for the burning of incense because the incense was actually burned in them.[[56]](#footnote-28704) There were firepans associated with the Menorah that were made of gold (Exod. 25:38), and firepans (same Hebrew word) that were made of bronze that were associated with the altar (Exod. 38:3). The firepans that were associated with the Menorah could have held coals that were used for lighting the wicks of the oil lamps, and also might have been where burning or smoldering wicks were placed (see commentary on Leviticus 10:1).

Exd 25:39

**“The menorah.”** The Hebrew text just reads “it,” but that can be confusing in the context, so “the menorah” was substituted for clarity. Since the whole menorah, including its branches and the utensils that went with it, was made of pure gold but only weighed about 75 pounds, it could not have been very large, perhaps only a couple of feet high.

**“a talent of pure gold.”** A “talent” was a measure of weight, and it varied, usually with the empire. For example, the Israelite, Babylonian, and Roman talents were all different. The Israelite talent was approximately 75 pounds (34 kg).

**Exodus Chapter 26**

Exd 26:1

**“you are to make the tabernacle.”** The Tabernacle, God’s dwelling place, was to be made of wood which was covered on the inside by skillfully woven tapestry, and on the outside by much more durable material.

The Tabernacle had four coverings. The innermost covering was of fine linen, which was to be of different colors—blue, purple, and scarlet—woven together. Also, it was to have cherubim woven into the cloth coverings. This fine linen with cherubim was what the priests could see when they were in the Tabernacle. On top of that linen covering was a covering of goat hair (Exod. 26:7). Goat hair was black, and it would have helped ensure that the inside of the Tabernacle was dark. The third covering was of rams’ skin that was either dyed red or tanned to be a reddish color (Exod. 26:14), and the fourth covering was to be of dugong skin (Exod. 26:14).

The Tabernacle was built in a way that pictured the Messiah, and the four coverings are a good example of that. The innermost covering, of material woven from blue, purple, and scarlet thread, with cherubim embroidered on it, represented Christ’s royalty as the Son of God. The second layer, of goat hair, represented Christ’s humanity and service—that he was fully human and had to serve God and deal with life just like everyone else (e.g., Heb. 4:15). The third layer, of ram’s skin dyed red, represented his death and shed blood for the sins of humankind. The outer layer, of dugong skin, represented the fact that he would not stand out because of some special appearance, because, as Isaiah says, “When we see him, there is no beauty that we should be attracted to him” (Isa. 53:2). Actually, all the parts of the Tabernacle reflected the person, life, and work of the Messiah in one way or another, although sometimes the lesson God is showing us is not as easy to see as it is in the four coverings of the Tabernacle.

Interestingly, the outer dimensions of the Tabernacle are never given in the Bible. The measurements of Solomon’s Temple are given in 1 Kings 6:2 as 20 cubits wide by 60 cubits long, and that seems to be twice as big as the Tabernacle, which would then be 10 cubits wide and 30 cubits long. Also, the sides of the Tabernacle were to be made of 20 boards one and a half cubits wide, which would make the Tabernacle itself 30 cubits long (Exod. 26:16-18). The west side of the Tabernacle (the back side) was made of six boards one and a half cubits wide, which would seem to make the Tabernacle 10 cubits wide (Exod. 26:22). However, there is some scholarly debate about that because it is not known exactly how the 20 boards were connected to one another—the Bible does not say. The “cubit” used to make both Moses’ Tabernacle and Solomon’s Temple seem to be the short cubit of about 18 inches (about 45.7 cm).

[For more on the cubit, see commentary on 2 Chron. 3:3.]

**“ten curtains.”** These “curtains” are the sheets of material that cover the Tabernacle. The Hebrew word translated as “curtains” is *yeriʿah* (#03407 יְרִיעָה), and it was used of curtains in a tent that acted as outer walls or were used for privacy. Here in Exodus, the two innermost coverings of the Tabernacle are referred to as “curtains.”

There are separate Hebrew words for the different fabrics and coverings of the Tabernacle. As we see here in Exodus 26:1-6 and also in Exodus 36:8-13, the innermost covering is referred to as a “curtain.” It was made of finely twisted linen with blue, purple, and scarlet material with cherubim embroidered into it, and it would have been beautiful to look at. This inner linen curtain would not have been much of a cover against the rain or snow, so it is called a “curtain,” not a “cover.”

The second covering of the Tabernacle was made of goats’ hair and was also referred to as a “curtain” (Exod. 26:7-13; 36:14-17), and it is also referred to as a “tent” (e.g., Exod. 26:7, 9, 11-14; 36:14, 18, 19). Goat hair was the standard material from which tents were made, and goat-hair tents provided protection from the sun and weather, so this “tent” provided some protection for the Tabernacle. Also, because goat hair was generally black, the goat hair covering helped the inside of the Tabernacle be dark even on the brightest days.

The two outer layers of the covering over the Tabernacle, the first of rams’ skins dyed red and the outermost covering, which was of dugong skin, are referred to as “coverings” (Exod. 26:14; 36:19; 40:19). A dugong is a “sea cow” that is very similar to a manatee but lives in the Red Sea and Gulf of Aqaba. The Hebrew word translated as “coverings” is *mikhseh* (#04372 מִכְסֶה). The outer coverings were to protect the Tabernacle and its contents, and the outermost covering of dugong skin would have been mostly waterproof.

Inside the Tabernacle was a veil that separated the Holy Place from the Holy of Holies. It is never called a “curtain,” but is referred to by the Hebrew word *porekhet* (#06532 פֹּרֶכֶת), which is translated as “veil” (Exod. 26:31-35; 36:35; Lev. 4:17).

The courtyard of the Tabernacle was formed and enclosed by a linen cloth wall, and the linen wall was referred to by the Hebrew word *qela* (#07050 קֶלַע), which is generally translated as “hangings.” The linen “wall” of the courtyard was hung from pillars and was 5 cubits high (7.5 feet; 2.28 m. Exod. 27:18; 38:18). The first use of “hangings” and part of the description of the outer wall is Exodus 27:9.

There were two “screens” that kept people from seeing inside the Tabernacle, and a veil, also referred to as a “screen” (Exod. 40:21) that kept priests in the Holy Place from seeing into the Holy of Holies. The only entrance to the courtyard of the Tabernacle was on the east side, and there was a “screen” (the Hebrew word is *masakh*; #04539 מָסָךְ), that separated the courtyard from the outside world (Exod. 27:16). Similarly, the only entrance to the Tabernacle itself was on the east side, and that entrance was also covered with a curtain referred to as a “screen” (*masakh*; #04539 מָסָךְ. Exod. 26:36-37). The three “screens”—the outer one that formed the entrance from the outside world into the Tabernacle courtyard, the second screen, the inner one that formed the entrance from the Tabernacle courtyard into the Tabernacle itself, and the screen (or “veil”) that separated the Holy Place from the Holy of Holies, were made of fine linen with blue, purple, and scarlet material. Thus, the three “screens” were made like the innermost covering of the Tabernacle, which was also made of fine linen with blue, purple, and scarlet material.

The Hebrew words that described the different parts of the Tabernacle were used quite accurately so that the reader could usually immediately know which part of the Tabernacle was being described by the specific words that were used.

**“finely twisted linen.”** The yarn (or thread) that the Tabernacle was to be made from was to consist of different colored threads—usually blue, purple, and scarlet as we see in Exodus 26:1—that were woven together to make a multi-colored type of yarn, that was then woven into the cloth of the Tabernacle itself. It was grand and very beautiful. The cloth of the ephod, breastplate, and waistband worn by the High Priest was to be of fine linen and have blue, purple, and scarlet, but added gold (Exod. 28:6, 8, 15). The gold was beaten into thin plates and then cut into thin wires or strands that were woven into the cloth (Exod. 39:3). The curtains of the courtyard of the Tabernacle that separated the outside world from the Tabernacle courtyard were just said to be of “finely twisted linen,” and so its natural color would have been white, but the curtain at the entrance to the courtyard of the Tabernacle was made of finely twisted linen and blue, purple, and scarlet, so the entrance to the Tabernacle courtyard would have really stood out and been like the Tabernacle curtains themselves.

**“purple.”** Purple dye was rare and very expensive (see commentary on 2 Chron. 3:14).

Exd 26:2

**“The length of each curtain is to be 28 cubits.”** The length of the innermost covering, the linen covering, was to be 28 cubits. The length of the other coverings was 30 cubits (Exod. 26:8).

**“all the curtains.”** That is, all the curtains in the same layer were to have the same measurement.”

Exd 26:3

**“and the other five curtains should be joined to one another.”** So there are two sets of five curtains joined to each other. The individual sets are sewn together, and then the two sets of five are coupled together.

Exd 26:4

**“You are to make loops of blue on the edge of the end curtain.”** The inner roof curtain of the Tabernacle was fine linen with cherubim. That was the roof layer that could be seen by the priests working in the Tabernacle. That roof curtain was in two pieces, apparently for ease of assembling and disassembling the Tabernacle when it was moved.

Exd 26:6

**“50 clasps of gold.”** The clasps for the inner curtains, the ones of fine linen with cherubim on them, were to be made of gold (Exod. 26:6). The clasps of the next layer, the goat hair clasps, were to be made of bronze (Exod. 26:11).

Exd 26:7

**“curtains of goats’ hair.”** The standard goat in biblical times in the Middle East had black hair, so most tents were black (cf. Song 1:5). One of the unique attributes of goat hair that made it excellent tent material is that when it is dry, it shrinks, so it breathes well and can be quite cool, but when it gets wet it swells and if tightly woven can become quite water repellent. It was for that reason that in the biblical culture, tents were made of goat hair. There are still a few goat’s hair tents used by some of the Bedouins who live in the Middle East, but making them is very laborious and time-consuming, and so most modern Bedouins use more modern and less labor-intensive materials for their tents.

**“curtains of goats’ hair as a tent over the tabernacle.”** We have to be careful not to get the wrong impression from this verse. The outer coverings were not to be a “tent” over the Tabernacle as if the Tabernacle had a huge tent over it; the coverings of the Tabernacle were to be the tent-like covering, in other words, a tent-shaped protective covering. The fine linen base covering was delicate and certainly not waterproof. It was for beauty and meaning. The outer three coverings were for protection, although the goat hair was also to keep the inside of the Tabernacle dark (the goat hair was black in color). Like any tent, the Tabernacle had a sloped roof, not a flat one, despite what many people believe (see commentary on Exod. 40:19).

**“you are to make 11 curtains.”** The goat hair covering was to be larger than the covering underneath it, which was made of fine linen. The inner covering of fine linen was to be of ten pieces, each 28 cubits long (Exod. 26:1-2). The covering on top of that linen covering was to be of 11 pieces, each 30 cubits long (Exod. 26:7-8). This ensured that the delicate inner covering was completely protected.

Exd 26:9

**“into one set...into another set.”** The Hebrew text is more literally, “by themselves,” that is, into one set by themselves, and the other six curtains into a set by themselves.

**“at the front of the tent.”** Exodus 26:9 is the first time in the Bible that the Tabernacle is called a “tent,” and it is called that six times in this chapter alone (Exod. 26:9, 11, 12, 13, 14, and 26:36). The Hebrew word translated as “tent” is *'ohel* (#0168 אֹהֶל), which is the common word for tent. This “tent” is commonly referred to as the “Tabernacle,” which is a translation of the Hebrew word *mishkan* (#04908 מִשְׁכָּן), which means “dwelling place,” the place where one dwells or lives. In fact, it could be argued that “Dwelling Place” would be a more informative translation of *mishkan* than “Tabernacle” (The CEB and NJB translate *mishkan* as “dwelling,” but since the English word “dwelling” can be a noun or a verb depending on the context, “Dwelling Place” is clearer).

The Tabernacle (“Dwelling Place”) is also referred to as the “Tent of Meeting.” The Hebrew phrase is *'ohel mo'ed*, in which *'ohel* (#0168 אֹהֶל) means “tent,” and is followed by *mo'ed* (#04150 מוֹעֵד or מֹעֵד), which means a “meeting” or a “place for a meeting.” Thus, the *'ohel mo'ed* is the “Tent of Meeting,” because it was the place where people met with God. The phrase *'ohel mo'ed* was translated as the “tabernacle of the congregation” in the King James Version, but that translation does not bring out the meaning of the Hebrew text very well. Exodus 27:21 is the first place the Tabernacle, the “Dwelling Place,” is referred to as the “Tent of Meeting.”

Exodus 26:9 uses the word “tent,” and at that time, tents had a sloped roof (or top) to shed rain. However, most of the modern drawings of the Tabernacle show it with a flat roof, which is largely due to scholars trying to fit the coverings that are described in Exodus onto the Tabernacle. But there is no compelling reason to believe the roof was flat, and since rain would have fallen on it, especially once Israel settled in the Promised Land, it is more reasonable to assume that this “tent” had a normal tent shape, even if the roof was only slightly sloped.

Exd 26:11

**“50 clasps of bronze.”** The clasps for the inner curtains, the ones of fine linen with cherubim on them, were to be made of gold (Exod. 26:6). The clasps of the next layer, the goat hair clasps, were to be made of bronze (Exod. 26:11).

Exd 26:12

**“the half curtain that remains.”** Although it is not stated, it is assumed that the extra curtain length was to be split. Half of the 4 cubits was to be doubled in the front of the Tabernacle, and two cubits was to hang down over the back of the Tabernacle.

**“the tent…the tabernacle.”** The Hebrew word translated as “tent” is *'ohel* (#0168 אֹהֶל), which is the common word for tent, and the word translated as “Tabernacle” is *mishkan* (#04908 מִשְׁכָּן), which means “dwelling place,” the place where one dwells or lives (see commentary on Exod. 26:9).

The shape of the Tabernacle has been a subject of debate for many years. Most scholars think that it had a flat roof because that seems to fit the coverings better than a sloped roof. However, the Tabernacle is called a “tent” many times in Scripture, and tents had sloped roofs, even if they were not too steeply sloped.

Exd 26:14

**“covering.”** The outer two coverings over the Tabernacle are superficially said to be “coverings.” The Hebrew word for those coverings is *mikhseh* (#04372 מִכְסֶה). The outer coverings were to protect the Tabernacle and its contents. In contrast, the inner veil of fine linen is called a “veil,” and the Hebrew word is *porekhet* (#06532 פֹּרֶכֶת).

**“make a covering for the tent.”** The first two layers of the roof of the Tabernacle—the first of finely twined purple and scarlet linen with cherubim embroidered on it and the second of goat hair—could have been referred to as the “tent.” However, it is also possible that the “tent” was specifically the goat hair covering because in the culture of the Middle East, tents were made of goat hair. In any case, all of the tents in that culture were tent-shaped and had a sloped roof, and calling the Tabernacle a “tent” indicated that the Tabernacle was also built with a sloped roof (see commentary on Exod. 40:19). It is also worth noting that in the biblical culture, tents were made of goats’ hair, which was black and which shrank in dry weather allowing the tent to breathe, and then swelled in wet weather making the tent water-repellent (Exod. 26:7-13). Also, as we see in this context, “a covering” (*mikhseh*) for the “tent” referred to one of the coverings that made up the tent-shaped Tabernacle roof, and there were two coverings, the rams’ skin and the dugong skin.

[For more on the Tabernacle being in the shape of a tent with a sloped roof, see commentary on Exod. 40:19.]

**“rams’ skins dyed red.”** The Hebrew could also mean tanned rams’ skins (see commentary on Exod. 25:5).

**“dugong.”** A mammal quite like a manatee that lives in the Red Sea and the Gulf of Aqaba. See commentary on Exodus 25:5.

Exd 26:15

**“You are to make the boards for the tabernacle.”** These boards would give the Tabernacle strength and stability, and they were covered on both the inside and the outside with coverings; finely woven cloth on the inside, and durable skins on the outside. The boards made the walls of the Tabernacle very solid so they would not billow in and out with the wind like a standard tent would.

Exd 26:16

**“The length of each board is to be ten cubits.”** Ten cubits is 15 feet (4.57 meters), which would make the Tabernacle quite an imposing structure. The average tent that people lived in would be barely high enough for a man to stand inside, and thus perhaps around six or seven feet or less (and the Israelites were not generally as tall as people in Western society are now). Although the Tabernacle was behind the white curtains of the courtyard, at 15 feet (4.57 m) high, the people could still see the top of the Tabernacle standing up higher than the outer curtain, the outer “hanging.”

Exd 26:17

**“two projections.”** The Hebrew word translated as “projections” is *yad* (#03027 יָד), meaning “hands.” These “hands” were some kind of projection that stuck out of the bottom of the wall boards of the Tabernacle and joined with the bases that were on the ground under the wall boards. The boards were each about 18 inches wide, so the two “hands” (projections) would have been on the bottom of each board toward the ends—thus almost 18 inches apart—of the boards for maximum stability.

Exd 26:19

**“under one board...under the next board.”** The wording is somewhat awkward for us. We would say something like, “you are to make 40 bases of silver under the 20 boards; two bases are to be under the first board for its two projections, and two bases are to be under the next board in the wall for its two projections, and so forth for each board in the wall.”

Exd 26:20

**“the second side.”** The Hebrew word translated as “side” is the same as the word often translated as “rib” (Adam’s “rib”) in Genesis 2:21.

Exd 26:22

**“the west side.”** The Tabernacle and Temple were set up so that the opening in the front faced east, the direction of the rising sun. Light often symbolized God’s righteousness and truth, so it was symbolic that the light of the rising sun always shone into the Tabernacle and Temple.

Exd 26:23

**“as the corner-structures.”** There were two corner structures.

Exd 26:24

**“They are to be separated at the bottom and joined at its top to one ring.”** What the Hebrew text means is not explicit in the text. The boards were to be “twins,” but what that meant is not described. The two major interpretations are the boards were to be “doubled” (ASV, CJB, CSB, KJV, NAB, NASB, NIV, ) or “separated” (CEB, ESV, LSB, NRSV, RSV). Since the twinning of the boards seems to be for stability, it seems that the end boards were spread into an “A-frame” for the stability of the structure. Although the wording could refer to the corner boards being doubled due to the pressure put on the corners of the structure from the wind.

Exd 26:25

**“There are to be eight boards *total*.”** That is, the back wall of the Tabernacle was to have eight boards total. Six were to be placed side by side, and the end boards on the back wall were to be double, either in an A-frame configuration for stability, or doubled for strength (see commentary on Exod. 26:24).

Exd 26:26

**“You are to make bars of acacia wood.”** The Tabernacle had horizontal bars on the inside that strengthened and stabilized it. The bars were for the north, south, and west sides but the east side, the entrance, did not have bars.

Exd 26:28

**“The middle bar *is to be* in the center of the boards.”** Since the wall boards of the Tabernacle were to be ten cubits high (15 feet; 4.5 meters), the middle bar was halfway up the wall, or 7:5 feet (2.28 meters) from the ground.

Exd 26:31

**“You are to make a veil of blue and purple and scarlet.”** This was the curtain that separated the Holy Place (the outer room of the Tabernacle) from the Holy of Holies (the innermost room of the Tabernacle). This inner curtain is called a “veil,” the Hebrew word is *porekhet* (#06532 פֹּרֶכֶת). This is different from the other “covers,” for example the covering of goat hair. The Hebrew word for those coverings is *mikhseh* (#04372 מִכְסֶה).

[For more on the curtain and finely twisted linen, see commentary on Exod. 26:1.]

Exd 26:33

**“the veil will separate the Holy Place from the Holy of Holies.”** This “veil” was hung vertically between the Holy Place and the Holy of Holies, and separated the Tabernacle into two rooms. The larger, outer room had the menorah, the table of the Bread of the Presence, and the golden altar of incense. The smaller inner room had the ark of the covenant with the cherubim on top.

Exd 26:34

**“atonement-cover.”** Traditionally called the “mercy seat” (see commentary on Exod. 25:17).

**“the ark of the testimony.”** This is the ark of the covenant, here called “the ark of the testimony” because it held the tablets with the Ten Commandments written on them, which testify to the covenant God made with Israel when God promised to be Israel’s God and the Israelites promised to obey God (Exod. 24:3-8; cf. Exod. 19:3-6).

Exd 26:35

**“place the table.”** This is referring to the table with the Bread of the Presence on it.

**“outside the veil.”** That is, “outside” (east of) the veil that separates the Holy Place from the Holy of Holies.

Exd 26:36

**“For the entrance of the tent.”** Here the Tabernacle is referred to as a “tent.” This is important because it seems the Tabernacle had to have some “tent-shape” to it so rain and snow would flow off. The most common depictions of the Tabernacle show it having a flat roof, but that would leak in times of continual rain or snow. Exodus 26:36 is evidence that the Tabernacle was shaped like a tent, even if the slope of the roof was quite shallow.

**“you are to make a screen.”** There were two screens that kept people from seeing inside the Tabernacle. There was a screen on the east side of the Tabernacle courtyard that kept people from seeing into the courtyard (Exod. 27:16) and there was a screen on the east side of the Tabernacle itself that kept people who were in the courtyard from seeing into the Tabernacle (Exod.26:36-37).

The screen that is mentioned here in Exodus 26:36-37 is the screen in front of the Tabernacle itself that kept people from seeing into the Holy Place, the eastern room of the Tabernacle. The Hebrew word that is translated as “screen” for both of the screens is *masakh* (#04539 מָסָךְ), which is simply a word for cover or curtain, but it is not the same word as is used for “curtain” in Exodus 26:1-6.

The front of the “Tent,” the Tabernacle, was to be covered with a screen so that people could not see inside it. So the Tabernacle was built with curtains all around it, and then outside it was a courtyard, that had the bronze altar of sacrifice and the laver for washing, and the courtyard was surrounded by linen curtains, whose natural color would have been white (see Exod. 27:18). Covering the entrance of the Tabernacle courtyard was a “screen” that kept outsiders from watching what happened inside the courtyard, including the sacrifices and offerings.

[For more on the screen and finely twisted linen, see commentary on Exod. 26:1.]

**Exodus Chapter 27**

Exd 27:1

**“You are to make the altar of acacia wood.”** The great altar of sacrifice is also described in Exodus 38:1-7. The altar was the first thing a person came to when they entered the Tabernacle courtyard. The burnt offerings and sacrifices were to be burned on it. The priests, not the Levites, were to burn the sacrifices on the altar (Num. 18:5). The fire on the altar was to be kept burning; it was never to go out (Lev. 6:12-13).

**“The altar must be square.”** As we read the description of the great altar of sacrifice, we see that it was a hollow square built out of wood covered with bronze, and the altar had a bronze grate inside it on which the wood and sacrifices were placed. The altar was set up in the courtyard of the Tabernacle.

Exd 27:2

**“Its horns.”** The “horns” on the altar are projections on the four corners, and one of their functions was to keep wood and other things from falling off the altar. Exactly what the “horns” were was not understood until archaeologists began uncovering various altars and incense altars that had the “horns” intact. Thus, for example, some early drawings of the altar had horns that looked like cow horns coming from the altar. The horns on the altar were not exclusively Israelite. Archaeologists uncovered a Canaanite horned altar at Meggido.

The horns of the altar were made of one piece with the altar. They were not made separately and then attached later. That was also true of the golden altar of incense in the Holy Place of the Tabernacle (Exod. 30:2).

Exd 27:4

**“You are to make a grate for it, a network of bronze.”** The bronze mesh grate would allow air to circulate from under the wood and sacrifices on the altar so that the fire would burn hot and burn the sacrifices and offerings completely. The grate would allow the ashes to fall to the bottom of the altar and it was placed halfway up the inside of the altar so there would be room for the ashes below and the sacrifices above. The bronze grate would have to be very thick to withstand having a fire on it day after day.

The Bible does not tell us how the ashes were removed. The fire on the altar was not to go out (Lev. 6:9, 12-13) because God lit the fire when the altar was first built (Lev. 9:24), and that special fire from God was to be kept going. It seems very unlikely that the grating would be lifted up to get to the ashes below while the fire was still going, and thus it is much more likely that there was an open place in one or more sides of the altar that allowed people to shovel the ashes out from under the fire. Associated with the altar were shovels that would have been used to remove the ashes, and pots that were used to take the ashes away.

Exd 27:7

**“sides.”** This is the same word as is translated “ribs” in many English versions of Genesis 2:21-22 (Adam’s “rib”).

Exd 27:8

**“You are to make it hollow, out of planks.”** The altar of sacrifice was to be a hollow square, made from acacia wood planks covered in bronze (Exod. 27:1, 2, 8), with a bronze grate in it on which to put the wood and sacrifices. The Hebrew word translated as “planks” is the same word translated as “tablets,” in the tablets of stone with the Ten Commandments. The word refers to the shape, i.e., “plank shaped.” Although the altar was to be made of wooden planks covered in bronze, the fire on the altar must have been kept away from the planks so that they did not burn up.

Exd 27:9

**“hangings.”** The “walls” of the Tabernacle courtyard were made of linen that was hung from pillars that surrounded the Tabernacle. The linen wall was referred to by the Hebrew word *qela* (#07050 קֶלַע), which is generally translated as “hangings.”

The coverings over the top of the Tabernacle are referred to as “coverings” (see commentary on Exod. 26:1). In contrast, Exodus 27:9 is referring to the cloth walls of the Tabernacle courtyard, and those cloth walls “hung” down and made it impossible for outsiders to see what the people inside the Tabernacle courtyard were doing.

Exd 27:10

**“with their 20 pillars and their 20 bases.”** The north and south courtyard cloth outer walls were 100 cubits long[[57]](#footnote-26511) with 20 pillars and bases on each wall. That means that the space between the pillars was to be 5 cubits.[[58]](#footnote-23167) The cloth back wall, the west wall, was to be 50 cubits[[59]](#footnote-13720) and have ten pillars and bases, so the west wall also had pillars spaced 5 cubits apart (Exod. 27:12). The east courtyard wall also totaled 50 cubits (Exod. 27:13), but was made differently. Looking from the east at the Tabernacle enclosure, the east side had two “shoulders,” each 15 cubits wide, one “shoulder” on the north side and one on the south, with a 20-cubit screen in the middle so priests and Levites could enter the Tabernacle courts. However, how the screen was placed so people could enter the Tabernacle courtyard is not described in the Bible. There are a number of details on how the Tabernacle was built that are left out of the Bible, so although we can get a general idea of what the Tabernacle looked like, an exact model is impossible to build.

**“The hooks of the pillars and their bands are to be of silver.”** There are a lot of details missing from the description of the Tabernacle. In this case, the exact function of the hooks and bands is not given. We can assume that a band went around each pillar and that the hooks attached to the bands and the curtains were hung from the hooks; that would be a likely guess and would make sense.

Exd 27:12

**“there are to be hangings of 50 cubits.”** For a more complete description of the hangings, see commentary on Exodus 27:10.

Exd 27:13

**“the width of the courtyard is to be 50 cubits.”** The west end of the Tabernacle courtyard was 50 cubits (75 feet; 22.86 m), and the “wall” was formed from cloth hangings. In contrast, the east “wall” of the courtyard was made up of three sets of hangings, two identical hangings, each 15 cubits wide (22.5 feet; 6.86 m)—one on the right side and one on the left side. In between those two sets of hangings was a hanging “screen” of fine linen woven with blue, purple, and scarlet that was 20 cubits wide (30 feet; 9.14 m). So the east side was 50 cubits wide like the west side was, but the middle part was a 20-cubit screen that allowed people in and out of the courtyard but kept outsiders from seeing into the courtyard (see commentary on Exod. 27:10).

Exd 27:14

**“to the side *of*.”** The Hebrew word translated as “side” is “shoulder,” and the phrase is literally, “on the shoulder of.” Looking from the east at the outer “wall” of the Tabernacle courtyard, the east side cloth wall of the Tabernacle was 50 cubits (Exod. 27:13), just as the west cloth outer “wall” was 50 cubits (Exod. 27:12). However, the way the east wall was constructed was unique because the only entrance to the Tabernacle and the Tabernacle courtyard was on the east. The east outer cloth wall was composed of two “shoulders,” each 15 cubits (22.5 feet; 6.85 m) wide, and a screen that was 20 cubits wide (30 feet; 9.14 m) in between the two “shoulders.” The shoulders were white linen (Exod. 27:9), while the screen in the middle was multi-colored (Exod. 27:16). Thus, looking at the east courtyard “wall” from a distance, a person would see a 15-cubit wide wall of white linen on the left (south) side, then a 20-cubit wide middle “screen” of “finely twisted linen of blue and purple and scarlet” (Exod. 27:16), and then a 15-cubit wide wall of white linen on the right (north) side. The white linen walls on the north and south were called “shoulders” here in Exodus 27:14.

The two shoulder pieces of white linen were each 15 cubits wide and were held up by three pillars on three bases (Exod. 27:14). The middle cloth screen was 20 cubits wide and was held up by four pillars and bases (Exod. 27:16). The only way that 10 pillars could hold up 50 cubits of cloth spaced 5 cubits apart was for one pillar of one of the “shoulders,” the side pieces, to also hold up one end of the screen in the middle. However, exactly how that was done is not described in the Bible.

Exd 27:16

**“for the gateway of the courtyard there is to be a screen.”** The entrances to the Tabernacle itself and the Tabernacle courtyard were both on the east side. The screen between the Tabernacle courtyard and the Tabernacle itself is described in Exodus 26:36-37. The entrance from the outside world into the Tabernacle courtyard is described here in Exodus 27:16, and it was called a “gate” or “gateway,” and it was a screen 20 cubits wide (30 feet; 9.14 m). It was held up by pillars on bases, so it did not open and shut like a door on hinges. Exactly how people got from the outside to behind the screen and into the courtyard is not described in the Bible. It is possible that the “screen” was offset somehow such that people could walk around it, or perhaps people entering the courtyard had to push the curtain aside and walk through it.

**“finely twisted linen.”** The curtains of the courtyard were just made of finely twisted linen, whose natural color would have been white. In contrast, the entry screen (the curtains) that one had to go through to get from the outside world into the Tabernacle courtyard were finely twisted linen with blue, purple, and scarlet, so the entry screen to the Tabernacle was made like the veil that covered the Tabernacle.

[For more on the curtain and finely twisted linen, see commentary on Exod. 26:1.]

Exd 27:17

**“All the pillars of the courtyard are to be banded with silver.”** The pillars of the Tabernacle courtyard were set in bases of bronze, and near the top, they had bands made of silver that had silver hooks, and the curtains that composed the walls of the Tabernacle courtyard were hung from the hooks.

Exd 27:18

**“the width 50 *cubits* throughout.”** The Hebrew is more literally, “fifty by fifty,” but it means the whole courtyard was to be 50 cubits wide in every place.

**“the height is to be five cubits.”** That is a height of 7.5 feet, which is not terribly tall, but it is tall enough that no one could look inside, especially since the average Israelite was not as tall as the average Westerner today. Thus, the curtain around the Tabernacle set a strong boundary between that which was holy and that which was common. The “regular Israelites” were not to go inside the curtain and into the courtyard without an approach-offering (see commentary on Lev. 1:2).

**“finely twisted linen.”** The curtains that separated the outside world from the Tabernacle courtyard were to be of fine linen, and the natural color would be white. These were not like the curtains of the Tabernacle itself, which had linen of blue, scarlet, and purple yarn (see commentary on Exod. 26:1).

Exd 27:19

**“All the accessories of the tabernacle *used* in all its service.”** This is speaking of the accessories used in the courtyard, for example, in tending the altar of sacrifice (e.g., Exod. 27:3). The accessories used inside the Tabernacle, in the Holy Place, were to be of gold (Exod. 25:29, 38).

**“and all its tent pegs and all the pegs of the courtyard.”** The tent pegs that held up the Tabernacle and the pegs and ropes that held up the long curtain that formed the courtyard around the Tabernacle are mentioned several times in Exodus. Tent pegs and ropes to hold up the Tabernacle itself and the curtains that formed the courtyard were absolutely necessary, just as they still are with modern tents.

Exd 27:20

**“they bring to you pure oil of pressed olives for the light.”** One of the responsibilities of the people of Israel was to bring olive oil to the priests at the Tabernacle so it could be burned every night. In this context, “regularly” does not mean all day every day, but continually in the sense of every night, night after night (see Exod. 27:21; 30:8; Lev. 24:3).

**“so that the lamp burns regularly.”** This is one rendering of the Hebrew text. It could also be that the “lamp was kindled regularly,” that is, that the Levites lit the lamp regularly due to the olive oil that was the fuel.

Exd 27:21

**“the Tent of Meeting.”** This is the first time the Tabernacle (the “Dwelling Place”) is called “the Tent of Meeting.” The Tabernacle is referred to in different ways. It is simply called the “tent” (see commentary on Exod. 26:9). It is called the “Tabernacle,” perhaps more properly, the “Dwelling Place.” And it is called “the Tent of Meeting.” The Hebrew word translated as “tent” is *'ohel* (#0168 אֹהֶל), which is the common word for tent. This “tent” is also commonly referred to as the “Tabernacle,” and “Tabernacle” is a translation of the Hebrew word *mishkan* (#04908 מִשְׁכָּן), which means “dwelling place,” the place where one dwells or lives. In fact, it could be argued that “Dwelling Place” would be a more informative translation of *mishkan* than “Tabernacle” (The CEB, NJB, and Everett Fox[[60]](#footnote-28201) translate *mishkan* as “Dwelling,” but since the English word “dwelling” can be a noun or a verb depending on the context, “Dwelling Place” seems clearer).

The “tent,” the “Tabernacle” (“Dwelling Place”) is also referred to as the “Tent of Meeting,” as we see here in Exodus 27:21. The Hebrew phrase is *'ohel mo'ed*, in which *'ohel* (#0168 אֹהֶל) means “tent,” and is followed by *mo'ed* (#04150 מוֹעֵד or מֹעֵד), which means a “meeting” or a “place for a meeting.” Thus, the *'ohel mo'ed* is the “Tent of Meeting,” because it was the place where people met with God. The phrase *'ohel mo'ed* was translated as the “tabernacle of the congregation” in the King James Version, but that translation does not bring out the meaning of the Hebrew text very well.

[For more on the Tabernacle, also called the “Tent,” also called the “Tent of Meeting,” see commentary on Exod. 25:9.]

**“the veil that is in front of the testimony.”** This “veil” is the fine linen veil that separated the Holy Place from the Holy of Holies (Exod. 36L31-35).

**“the testimony.”** One of the names of the ark of the covenant that was in the Holy of Holies in the Tabernacle was “the testimony,” because the ark of the covenant contained the Ten Commandments that the Israelites agreed to obey. In the Tabernacle, the ark of the covenant was in the innermost room, called the Holy of Holies. A “veil,” a linen curtain, separated the inner room of the Tabernacle, called the Holy of Holies, from the outer room of the Tabernacle, called the Holy Place. The Holy Place had the golden altar of incense, the table with the Bread of the Presence on it, and the menorah (“lampstand”) with seven oil lamps on it.

**“Aaron and his sons are to tend it from evening to morning before Yahweh.”** The priests—Aaron and his descendants—kept the menorah lamps burning all night. They lit them in the evening and snuffed them out in the morning. It was the priests who tended to the things in the Holy Place: the menorah, the Table of the Bread of the Presence, and the golden altar of incense.

**Exodus Chapter 28**

Exd 28:1

**“Nadab and Abihu.”** Shortly after this, Nadab and Abihu offered illegitimate fire before Yahweh and died (Lev. 10:1-2), and the line of the High Priest continued through the line of Eleazar.

Exd 28:2

**“for glory.”** This is the same word for “glory” as in the phrase, “the glory of Yahweh.” The High Priest was a primary representative of God, and as such was to be a reflection of His glory on earth.

Exd 28:3

**“priest.”** By implication, this is the High Priest. After Aaron died, his son Eleazar took the position of High Priest.

Exd 28:4

**“These are the garments that they are to make.”** Here in Exodus 28:4, six of the nine pieces of the clothing of the High Priest are mentioned: the breastplate, the ephod, the robe, the checkered tunic, the turban, and the sash. The other three pieces, the gold plate with “Holy to Yahweh” that went on the turban (Exod. 28:36-38), and the linen underwear (Exod. 28:42-43), and the waistband (Exod. 28:8) are mentioned later in the chapter. The Bible does not say why all the clothing was not described in one place.

**“sash.”** There are separate words for “sash” and “waistband,” and they are two different articles of clothing (Lev. 8:7).

Exd 28:5

**“They are to use the gold.”** The garments that the High Priest wore had gold thread interwoven with the blue, purple and scarlet material. This set him apart from the other priests (Exod. 28:3). It also set him apart from other materials in the Tabernacle: the innermost covering of the Tabernacle, the veil of the Tabernacle, and the screens of the Tabernacle, all of which had blue, purple, and scarlet thread but not gold (Exod. 26:1, 31, 36). The gold thread was made by pounding the gold into thin plates and then cutting them into thin thread-like wires (Exod. 39:3).

When we closely examine the garments of the High Priest and things like his breastplate of judgment and the gold medallion on his turban, we can see that the High Priest was distinctly set apart from the other priests, the other materials used in the tabernacle, and the common people. That the high priest was distinctly set apart from the rest of the priests and Tabernacle is a reflection of his exalted position as representative of God on earth and a judge and mediator between God and people. It was also a reflection of the exalted position the Messiah would one day have, because the Messiah would one day be the sinless and everlasting judge and mediator between God and people.

Exd 28:6

**“They are to make the ephod.”** The ephod is not well understood, and for good reason. Lots of different characteristics are ascribed to an ephod. Here in Exodus 28:6, the ephod seems to be something like a smock that was worn by the High Priest, although its exact size, length, and shape are not described. Not just the High Priest wore an ephod, because in David’s time, a number of priests wore them (1 Sam. 22:18). In fact, David, who was not a priest, wore one himself when he came into Jerusalem (2 Sam. 6:14). Also in David’s time, there was an ephod in the Tabernacle behind which was the sword of Goliath (1 Sam. 21:9). When Samuel was a young boy, he wore an ephod (1 Sam. 2:18). Sometimes the ephod was not worn, but was carried in one’s hand (1 Sam. 23:6).

It seems a totally different use of “ephod” is in Judges because Gideon made an ephod out of gold that became a snare to him and to Israel because it became an object of worship, so that may have been some kind of idol, or perhaps a smock with something that could be worshiped on it (Judg. 8:27).

**“finely twisted linen, of gold.”** The High Priest’s garments were interwoven with gold (see commentary on Exod. 28:5). For more on the finely twisted linen, see commentary on Exodus 26:1.

Exd 28:7

**“corners.”** The Hebrew word can be translated as “edges” or “corners,” such as in the REV. Although the word “upper” is not in the text, the shoulder straps had to be attached to the upper corners or else the ephod would flip upside down.

Exd 28:8

**“gold.”** The High Priest’s garments were interwoven with gold, which set him apart (see commentary on Exod. 28:5).

**“finely twisted linen.”** For more on the cloth and finely twisted linen, see commentary on Exodus 26:1.

Exd 28:9

**“onyx stones.”** While chemically there were several stones that were referred to as onyx, that does not help us much when it comes to color. Onyx is usually banded, or striped, but the stone can be almost translucent to black, and color variations include red, brown, tan, black, and blueish-white and white. The stone is quite soft and is engraved quite easily.

**“the names of the sons of Israel.”** In this context, the “sons of Israel” are the sons of Jacob, the twelve of them. The sons in their birth order are given in Genesis 29:31-30:34, and Genesis 35:23-26.

Exd 28:10

**“in the order of their birth.”** The birth of the twelve sons of Jacob is recorded in Genesis 29:31-30:24, and Genesis 35:23-26. The names in order (with their mothers) are Reuben, Simeon, Levi, Judah, (all four from Leah), Dan (Bilhah), Naphtali (Bilhah), Gad (Zilpah), Asher (Zilpah), Issachar (Leah), Zebulun (Leah), Joseph (Rachel), and Benjamin (Rachel).

Exd 28:11

**“as a gem cutter engraves a seal.”** The “seal” would be a signet ring, cylinder seal, or scarab seal. These were very common in the ancient world and identified the owner. There were to be twelve stones on the breastplate of the High Priest, and each stone was to have the name of a tribe cut into it, just like a seal has a name or title cut into it.

[For more on seals and signets, see commentary on Gen. 41:42.]

Exd 28:13

**“You are to make gold filigree settings.”** These settings are the settings that are mentioned later, to which the gold rope-chains were attached (Exod. 28:25). It also seems that these settings are the settings in which the onyx stones are set on the shoulder pieces of the ephod that the High Priest wore (Exod. 28:11).

Exd 28:15

**“a breastplate of judgment.”** The Hebrew word translated as “breastplate” is *choshen* (#02833 חֹשֶׁן), and that word is only used of this particular article of clothing. It was a “breastplate” by which judgments were given. The “breastplate” was made of cloth and was basically a large pocket that had the Urim and Thummim in it, two stones that, by drawing out one or the other, gave the judgment of God (see commentary on Exod. 28:30).

**“finely twisted linen.”** The breastplate had gold thread like the other garments of the High Priest (see commentary on Exod. 28:5).

[For more on the cloth of finely twisted linen, see commentary on Exod. 26:1.]

Exd 28:16

**“and folded double.”** The double fold created the pocket that the Urim and Thummim were in.

Exd 28:17

**“mount on it settings.”** The Hebrew word translated “mount” and “settings” is the same root word, the first being a verb and the second a noun. The noun and verb are both singular, but the noun is a collective singular, so the translation “settings” is appropriate. That the two words are the same explains why Young’s Literal Translation has “set in it settings.” Although that is a very accurate translation grammatically, it can be confusing because the stones were not just “set” on the breastplate, they were firmly mounted on it so they would not fall off.

**“carnelian, topaz, and emerald.”** The exact identity of some of the stones on the breastplate of the High Priest is not known, and scholars have differing opinions about what they are, and this uncertainty accounts for the differences in the identities of the stones in the various English translations. The translation “carnelian, topaz, and emerald” occurs in several versions (e.g., CEB, CJB, CSB). Although some English versions have “ruby” as one of the stones, in over 150 years of archaeological excavations in Israel, no actual ruby or diamond has been found, so they are almost certainly not the stones in the breastplate of the High Priest.

Exd 28:18

**“lapis lazuli.”** The deep blue color of lapis lazuli—a stone that was well-known in the ancient Near East—was often associated with God and his throne (Exod. 24:10; Job. 28:16; Isa. 54:11; Ezek. 1:26; 10:1). The majority English translation, “sapphire,” is almost certainly wrong (see commentary on Ezek. 1:26).

Exd 28:21

**“Like the engravings on a seal.”** The “seal” was usually a signet ring, cylinder seal, or scarab seal. Since the Israelites had just come out of Egypt they would have been very familiar with the scarab seal, which was common in Egypt. The seals were usually made of stone and had letters and/or characters engraved on them so that when they were pushed into something soft like clay they left a distinct impression, as distinct as a signature.

[For more on seals and signets, see commentary on Gen. 41:42.]

Exd 28:25

**“the two settings.”** The two settings are mentioned in Exodus 28:13-14, and by implication they are on the shoulder straps of the ephod.

Exd 28:26

**“you are to put them on the two *bottom* ends of the breastplate.”** The two bottom rings attach to the two lower rings on the ephod so that the breastplate does not flap on the belly of the High Priest.

Exd 28:28

**“bind the breastplate by its rings to the rings of the ephod.”** There were rings on the ephod and rings on the breastplate, and these two rings were tied together to keep the ephod from bouncing on the chest of the High Priest.

**“so that it will be above the skillfully woven waistband.”** The breastplate is “above,” i.e., “higher up than,” the waistband.[[61]](#footnote-15743)

**“does not swing out from the ephod.”** The breastplate of the High Priest, which held the Urim and Thummim, was to be securely fastened to the ephod, the garment he was wearing, so that it would not bounce in and out on his chest.

Exd 28:29

**“breastplate of judgment.”** The breastplate with the Urim and Thummim is called the “breastplate of judgment” because it was used to judge the people and situations so the people would know the will of God.

Exd 28:30

**“the Urim and Thummim.”** The “Urim” and “Thummim” were two stones that were in the breastplate of the High Priest and he would draw one or the other out of the breastplate to find the decision of God on a matter. The two stones apparently felt the same to human touch, so the High Priest could not tell by touch which stone was which and thus cheat to get his own way, and that gave the people confidence that the decision made by the Urim and Thummim was made by God. Proverbs 16:33 says, “The lot is cast into the lap, but each of its judgments is from Yahweh.” When a decision was made by the Urim and Thummin, it was considered a decision by “lot.” Many issues were settled by lot, that is, by drawing a stone out of the breastplate and seeing what the decision of Yahweh was.

For example, the land areas for the tribes of Israel were assigned areas by “lot,” that is, by the stones—the Urim and Thummim—that were in the breastplate of the High Priest (Josh. 14:2). The High Priest would draw out a stone which would indicate the decision of Yahweh (cf. Exod. 28:30; Lev. 8:8; Num. 27:21; Deut. 33:8; Josh. 21:4; 1 Sam. 28:6; Ezra 2:63; Neh. 7:65). The exact process, which was well-known at the time and thus was not described any detail in the Bible, is not well understood today. In Joshua 21:4, the “lot,” i.e., the stone, “came out,” that is, came out of the pocket on the front of the breastplate of the High Priest and indicated that the Kohathites were to be the first to be assigned cities in the Promised Land.

In Joshua 7:14-19, we see a good example of how the Urim and Thummin were used to discover the will of God. Yahweh “captured” (“took”) by lot using the Urim and Thummin the man, Achan, who stole things from Jericho and caused the defeat at the city of Ai (see commentary on Josh. 7:14). The same process was used to decide who the first king of Israel would be, and Saul “was taken,” that is, was taken by lot (1 Sam. 10:20-21).

[For more on the “lot” and the Urim and Thummim, see commentary on Exod. 28:30.]

**“And Aaron is to carry the judgment of the children of Israel on his heart.”** The translation” judgment” is correct. In this context, it seems to have multiple meanings. Some translations expand “judgment” to “means of judgment,” as if “judgment” was a metonymy for the means of judgment. The meaning “means of judgment” seems to be in the text, but it is not the only meaning. The High Priest also carried the “responsibility for judgment” upon his heart. It was his responsibility to remain holy in the eyes of God so that the judgments that were given by the Urim and Thummim (the stones in the breastplate) were correct. Also, the meaning of the word “judgment” likely includes the weight of feeling the judgments that the Israelites would incur if they sinned. For example, the “judgment” that Achan and his family received for stealing from Jericho meant the death of Achan and his family (Josh. 7:1-26). They deserved the death penalty because their sin caused the death of 36 people, but to execute a family even if they deserve it is still a weight on one’s heart.

Exd 28:31

**“robe.”** This is not a robe that has a slit up the middle to put on like a standard bathrobe, but is to be one piece and pulled over the head, like a pull-over sweatshirt (Exod. 28:31).

Exd 28:32

**“of a coat of mail.”** The meaning of this Hebrew word is uncertain, which is reflected in the different readings of the English versions. In any case, the people understood this to be some kind of weaving around the neck-hole that kept it from tearing. However, if you really pulled hard it would tear, just as the High Priest tore his robe at the trial of Jesus (Matt. 26:65).

Exd 28:33

**“pomegranates of blue and of purple and of scarlet.”** The pomegranates on the robe were made of linen material (Exod. 39:24). Just like the real pomegranate fruit has shades of different colors, the pomegranates on the robe of the High Priest were to have different colors instead of being one solid color.

**“*all* around its hem.”** The pomegranates and bells went all the way around the robe. The robe was not split, but was one piece around the body. How the arms came out is not described. It might have just had arm holes, but some kind of sleeve may have been sewn on.

Exd 28:35

**“Holy *Place*.”** What this “Holy *Place*” is, is not described (the Hebrew text simply reads, “goes into the Holy”). It was likely any room of the Tabernacle. Because the Hebrew text is so unclear, there are many different interpretations about the meaning of the text. Perhaps the most well-known is that the High Priest wore the bells so people could hear that he was still alive in the Holy of Holies, but that is tradition. A simple reading of the text seems to say that the sound of the bells is respectful to God and the High Priest wears them as he serves in the Tabernacle in general.

Exd 28:36

**“like the engravings of a seal.”** The “seal” would be a signet ring, cylinder seal, or scarab seal. These were very common in the ancient world and identified the owner.

[For more on seals and signets, see commentary on Gen. 41:42.]

Exd 28:38

**“will bear the guilt.”** The Hebrew word translated “bear” can mean “to carry or bear something,” or “to take away, remove” something. The idea of carrying the guilt was to carry it away, so the ideas are connected. If Aaron carried the guilt, he did it so that it would be taken away, atoned for.

**“offer as holy.”** The Hebrew has one word that the REV and Schocken Bible translate as “offer as holy.”

**“so that they are accepted before Yahweh.”** The Hebrew text is ambiguous here, and the scholars are divided as to what it means. Does “so that they are accepted” refer to the people who are doing the offering being accepted (CEB, NLT), or does it refer to the offerings themselves being accepted by God (BBE, CJB, GW, Rabbi Rashi)? Most English versions leave the text ambiguous, as does the REV. Also, however, this may be an amphibologia, where both meanings are true, and God has left the text ambiguous because the people are accepted before God, and thus so are their sacrifices.

Exd 28:40

**“You are to make tunics.”** The color of the garments of the ordinary priests is disputed by scholars. The Bible never specifically says, so some scholars say that material was made of the blue, purple, and scarlet thread, while other scholars say they were made of white linen.

**“caps.”** The translation “caps” is inexact, and does not necessarily carry the meaning of the Hebrew text, but the problem is that English does not have a word that exactly describes the headpiece that the priests wore. It was not a “headband” like athletes wear, and it was not a “hat,” “cap,” or “turban,” in the common way Westerners use those words, although it could be argued that “turban” is somewhat better than “cap.” The NET text note reads that the “cap” was “...a band of linen wrapped around the head, forming something like a brimless convex cap, resembling something like a half egg. It refers to the headgear of ordinary priests only.”

Exd 28:41

**“anoint them.”** The priests were to be anointed with God’s special anointing oil that was only used for God’s special holy things (Exod. 30:22-33)

**“ordain.”** The Hebrew text is an idiom. *The JPS Torah Commentary* says, “The Hebrew idiom *milleʾ yad* literally means “to fill the hand.” It is most frequently used in the sense of installing persons into priestly office.”[[62]](#footnote-20762) The commentary then goes on to suggest that the origin of the idiom was probably some concrete situation, such as a ceremony, in which some meaningful object was actually placed in the person’s hand, but through time, the ceremony was discontinued, and the phrase simply became an idiom. Since the ceremony was used for installing priests into office, the word “ordain” is appropriate, although the English word “ordain” can carry connotations that would not apply to the ancient priesthood, and vice versa.

Exd 28:42

**“linen.”** This is a different word than the other word that does mean linen.

**“cover the flesh of their nakedness.”** Here, their “nakedness” refers specifically to their genital area, thus, the garment went from the waist to the thigh. In fact, the word “nakedness” usually referred to the genital area.

Exd 28:43

**“the Tent of Meeting.”** Here, the Tabernacle (the “Dwelling Place”) is called “the Tent of Meeting.” The Hebrew word translated as “tent” is *'ohel* (#0168 אֹהֶל), which is the common word for tent. This “tent” is commonly referred to as the “Tabernacle,” which is a translation of the Hebrew word *mishkan* (#04908 מִשְׁכָּן), which means “dwelling place,” the place where one dwells or lives. In fact, it could be argued that “Dwelling Place” would be a more informative translation of *mishkan* than “Tabernacle” (The CEB and NJB translate *mishkan* as “dwelling,” but since the English word “dwelling” can be a noun or a verb depending on the context, “Dwelling Place” is clearer).

The “tent,” the “Tabernacle” (“Dwelling Place”) is also referred to as the “Tent of Meeting,” as we see here in Exodus 28:43. The Hebrew phrase is *'ohel mo'ed*, in which *'ohel* (#0168 אֹהֶל) means “tent,” and is followed by *mo'ed* (#04150 מוֹעֵד or מֹעֵד), which means a “meeting” or a “place for a meeting.” Thus, the *'ohel mo'ed* is the “Tent of Meeting,” because it was the place where people met with God. The phrase *'ohel mo'ed* was translated as the “tabernacle of the congregation” in the King James Version, but that translation does not bring out the meaning of the Hebrew text very well. Exodus 27:21 is the first place the Tabernacle, the “Dwelling Place,” is referred to as the “Tent of Meeting.”

**“or when they come near to the altar.”** From the word “or,” it seems that this is the great altar of sacrifice in the Tabernacle courtyard.

**Exodus Chapter 29**

Exd 29:1

**“This is what you are to do to them to set them apart as holy to serve me as priests.”** The actual ceremony is described in Leviticus 8, and much of the vocabulary is the same.

Exd 29:2

**“smeared with oil.”** The Hebrew word can mean “anointed,” and it is used many times that way. However, it can also mean “smear.”[[63]](#footnote-23573) In this case, it does not seem that the wafers were any more special than the bread and cakes, so “smeared” seems to be the better translation to get the meaning of the text. The purpose of the oil is not stated in the text, but the oil often signified the presence of God or the blessing of God.

**“fine wheat flour.”** The Hebrew word for “flour” indicates that it is finely ground flour.

Exd 29:4

**“the entrance of the Tent of Meeting.”** Aaron and his sons were to come to the entrance of the Tabernacle itself. That was close to the presence of God Himself, because He was enthroned above the ark of the covenant.

**“the Tent of Meeting.”** The “Tabernacle” (“Dwelling Place”) is also referred to as the “Tent of Meeting” because it was the place where people met with God. The Hebrew phrase is *'ohel mo'ed*, in which *'ohel* (#0168 אֹהֶל) means “tent,” and is followed by *mo'ed* (#04150 מוֹעֵד or מֹעֵד), which means a “meeting” or a “place for a meeting.” Thus, the *'ohel mo'ed* is the “Tent of Meeting” (see commentary on Exod. 27:21).

Exd 29:6

**“the holy crown.”** In this context, the “holy crown” is the medallion with “Holy to Yahweh” inscribed on it (cf. Exod. 39:30).

Exd 29:7

**“the anointing oil.”** This is the special anointing oil (Exod. 30:22-33).

Exd 29:9

**“caps.”** These “caps” were “a band of linen wrapped around the head, forming something like a brimless convex cap” (see commentary on Exod. 28:40).

**“ordain.”** For the translation “ordain,” see commentary on Exodus 28:41.

Exd 29:11

**“before Yahweh.”** The courtyard of the Tabernacle was “before Yahweh” because Yahweh was dwelling in the Tabernacle (cf. Exod. 25:22; Num. 7:89).

Exd 29:12

**“the altar … the altar.”** This “altar” is the great altar of sacrifice in the courtyard of the Tabernacle.

Exd 29:13

**“and the appendage on the liver.”** The Hebrew word translated as “appendage” is *yoteret* (#03508 ֑יתֶרֶת). The text is not clear about what this appendage could be. It could possibly be the gall bladder. According to the *HALOT* Hebrew-English lexicons, it refers to an “appendage of the liver,” and *HALOT* says that this appendage is found in cows, sheep, and goats, but is not in humans. However, that statement in *HALOT* is not correct.

**“burn them into smoke.”** The phrase “burn them into smoke” is the translation of the Hebrew verb *qatar* (#06999 מֻקְטָר), a verb that can refer to smoke, smell, or steam. The verb can mean “to make a sacrifice, burn a sacrifice, burn a sacrifice into smoke, burn incense or burn incense into smoke (thus, offer incense), fill something with fragrance.”[[64]](#footnote-13512) The exact translation in any given verse is determined by the context. The verb was used in a cultic context to refer to burning a sacrifice or burning it all the way into smoke, or to burning incense. For example, here in Exodus 29:13, the Common English Bible uses the phrase “burn them up in smoke” (cf. CJB, JPS, NASB, NRSV).

The smoke was a sweet smell to God. It is not that God likes the smell of smoke, but rather that the smoke of the sacrifice was supposed to represent the love and commitment of the person doing the sacrifice, and from God’s perspective, the sacrifice also looked forward to the sacrifice of His Son for the sins of humankind. Given that, in some contexts, the translation of the verb *qatar* could be expanded in a paraphrased or amplified Bible to “turn them into sweet smoke,” which is the reading in the margin of the NET First Edition Bible. The same Hebrew verb, *qatar*, was used for burning incense which produced a sweet smell (cf. Exod. 30:7). The smell of the burning is called a “soothing aroma to Yahweh” (cf. Lev. 1:9, 13,17; 3:16; 4:31; etc.). Given that the smoke was to be a soothing aroma to God and in that it was similar to the smoke of incense, here in Exodus 29:13, the YLT has that the priest made “perfume on the altar,” and Rotherham’s Emphasized Bible says, “burn as incense on the altar.”

That the smoke of the sacrifice or the smoke and smell of the incense was a blessing to God was based on the obedience and heart of love of the person doing the offering. When God’s people were disobedient, arrogant, sinful, and worshiped idols, the smell of the sacrifices and of the incense offended God (Isa. 1:11-13).

[For more information about the sacrifices of wicked people being of no value, see commentary on Amos 5:22.]

Exd 29:14

**“you are to burn them with fire outside of the camp.”** Students of Scripture are well aware that the Tabernacle and Temple had two altars: the golden altar of incense inside the Holy Place (Exod. 30:1-10; 37:25-28) and the large altar of sacrifice in the courtyard of the Tabernacle/Temple (Exod. 27:1-8; 38:1-7). However, there was a third altar associated with the Tabernacle and Temple that was “outside of the camp,” that is, it was outside of the area of the Tabernacle/Temple. It was on this third altar that things that were often considered unclean, such as the bodies of sin offerings, were burned (cf. Exod. 29:14; Lev. 4:12, 21; 8:17; 9:11; 16:27). This altar is associated with the death of Jesus Christ (Heb. 13:10; see commentary on Heb. 13:10).

**“it is a sin offering.”** Ordinarily, a sin offering was not completely burned up as this sin offering was. The regulations for the offerings were very complex, and the rules for any offering, such as the sin offering, varied according to who sinned and what the occasion was for the offering, such as, was it a “regular” offering or was it on a Sabbath or on the Day of Atonement. In some cases the parts of the animals were burned, as seems clear here in Exodus 29:4, but then in other cases the priests got to eat part of the sin offering (Lev. 6:24-30; 10:16-20).

Exd 29:15

**“the first ram.”** One of the two rams that were mentioned in Exodus 29:1.

Exd 29:16

**“throw.”** The Hebrew word translated as “throw” is *zaraq* (#02236 זָרַק), and although it has been traditionally translated as “sprinkle” (e.g., Geneva, KJV, ASV), it seems like “throw” is a more natural meaning. Most of the modern versions are going with a translation that involves an action that is more like throwing the blood on the altar than sprinkling it, e.g., “throw” (AMPC, CEB, ESV, and RSV); “Splash” (CJB, LSB, NAB, NET, and NIV); “Splatter” (CSB and NLT); “Dash” (JPS and NRSV).

Exd 29:18

**“Then you are to burn the whole ram into smoke on the altar.”** The burnt offering was to be completely burnt up except for the skin of the animal, which was given to the priests (Lev. 7:8). This was different from the other animal sacrifices such as the sin offering or fellowship offering because the person who offered that sacrifice got to eat some of the meat.

[For more on “burn...into smoke,” see commentary on Exod. 29:13.]

Exd 29:19

**“the second ram.”** The word “second” can also be translated as “other.” The second ram is a “ram of ordination,” and the priests got to eat some of the meat; it was not a whole burnt offering like the first ram was (cf. Exod. 29:18).

Exd 29:20

**“lobe.”** The Hebrew word is very rare and the English translations vary. It likely refers to the lobe of the ear. The lobe of the ear was pierced for service (even though “lobe” is not specifically designated in Exodus 21:6).

**“right ear…thumbs of their right hands...big toes of their right feet.”** Although there have been various suggestions as to why the ear, thumbs, and big toes are anointed, there is some agreement that the ear is anointed to emphasize that the priest must hear and obey the words of God, the thumb is anointed to emphasize that the priest must work the work of God, and the big toe was anointed to emphasize that the priest must walk the walk of God, that is, to live a holy and obedient life. Also, it has been suggested that the ear is the topmost visible part of the body, the hands are generally in about the middle of the body, and the toes are at the bottom of the body, and thus the three of them together suggest that the priest’s entire body and life be dedicated to the work of God.[[65]](#footnote-23904) It is noteworthy that when a leper was cleansed, he (or she) had their ear, thumb, and big toe anointed with blood (Lev. 14:14).

Exd 29:21

**“*some* of the blood that is on the altar and of the anointing oil.”** There would not have been enough blood taken from the sides of the altar to be able to sprinkle Aaron and his sons, so the blood from the altar was mixed with the anointing oil to make enough to

**“sprinkle.”** The Hebrew word translated as “sprinkle” in Exodus 29:21 is *nazah* (#05137 נָזָה), and in this context it means “sprinkle.” This is not the same Hebrew word as *zaraq* (#02236 זָרַק), which it traditionally translated “sprinkle” in verses such as Exodus 29:16 (see commentary on Exod. 29:16). For a more complete explanation of the mixing of blood and oil, see The New American Commentary on Exodus.[[66]](#footnote-24466)

Exd 29:22

**“the fat tail.”** There were breeds of sheep in the Middle East that had a tail that stored fat and often became very large and heavy. C. S. Cansdale writes about some breeds of sheep and says “the tail has become an organ for storing reserves of fat, serving as the hump in camels. This strange feature had developed long before Abram went to Canaan and it is found in Egyptian mummies of c. 2000 B.C. This was a characteristic of at least one breed kept in Palestine...and ‘fat tail’ (RV and RSV) refers to it.”[[67]](#footnote-22348) William Thompson writes about these fat tails also, and says, “in Arabia...there are two kinds of sheep. One of them is remarkable for an enormous length of tail, extending to three cubits, if not more. ...These tails (or, as the Bible more correctly calls them, the rump) of ordinary sheep in the market do not weigh more than 10 or 15 pounds...but when the sheep are well fattened, they grow to any enormous size. ...the cooks use this mass of fat instead of Arab butter, and many prefer it, as it is fresh and sweet, while the other is often rancid. No doubt this is the rump so often mentioned in the Levitical sacrifices, which was to be taken off hard by [close to] the backbone.[[68]](#footnote-27820)

**“the appendage of the liver.”** See commentary on Exodus 29:13.

**“ordination.”** The Hebrew is more literally “filling,” as in the idiom for ordination, “fill the hand” (see commentary on Exod. 28:41, “ordain”). Here, “ordination” is a noun in the Hebrew text, referring to the ceremony, not the act itself, in contrast to the verb in Exodus 28:41. The ram is called a ram for ordination again in Exodus 29:31.

Exd 29:23

**“one loaf.”** In Exodus 29:2 there was no mention of how many loaves of bread, or cakes, or wafers there were, but this verse shows there had to be more than one of each.

Exd 29:25

**“into smoke.”** See commentary on Exodus 29:13.

**“offering.”** This is a general word for offering, not a specific word for a specific kind of offering.

Exd 29:27

**“the thigh that is contributed.”** Cf. Exod. 29:27; Lev. 7:34; 10:14, 15; Num. 6:20.

**“set apart.”** Part of the meat for the ordination offering was to be set apart for Aaron and his sons, the priests.

Exd 29:29

**“ordained in them.”** This is the idiom “to fill the hand” (see commentary on Exod. 28:41).

Exd 29:32

**“At the entrance of the Tent of Meeting.”** The wording of the Hebrew text is ambiguous as to whether the basket of bread was at the entrance of the Tent of Meeting, or whether Aaron and his sons were to eat at the entrance of the Tent of Meeting. However, the scope of Scripture seems to clearly indicate that the second option is the correct one.

Exd 29:33

**“ordain them.”** The Hebrew is an idiom, “to fill the hand” (see commentary on Exod. 28:41).

**“unauthorized person.”** In this context, that refers to a non-priest.

**“they are holy.”** The “they” refers to the offering. The Common Jewish Bible glossed the reading to “this food is holy.”

Exd 29:34

(verse 26)

Exd 29:35

**“ordain.”** (see commentary on Exod. 28:41)

Exd 29:36

**“Every day you are to offer a bull as a sin offering for atonement.”** This is a separate sin offering and separate ceremony from the ceremony in which a bull was offered for the priests (Exod. 29:10-14).[[69]](#footnote-31746)

Exd 29:37

**“most holy.”** The Hebrew repeats the word “holy” twice; the first is singular and the second is plural. The repetition is for emphasis.

**“Whoever.”** The Hebrew can be translated as “whoever” or “whatever.” But the context points to “whoever” being the correct interpretation. The entire chapter of Exodus 29 is about Aaron and his sons, and them being set apart as holy and offering both animal sacrifices and grain offerings on the altar (Exod. 29:1-2). Furthermore, it was Aaron and his sons (later expanded to Aaron and his descendants as the family grew) who were set apart by God to be priests. Exodus 29:44 says, “I will set apart the Tent of Meeting and the altar as holy. Also, Aaron and his sons I will set apart as holy to serve me as priests.” Then Numbers 18:7, written soon after Exodus, makes it clear that only priests are to serve at the altar, i.e., offer the sacrifices. So the priests were holy and the priests were chosen by God to attend the altar. So it makes perfect sense for Exodus 29:37 to say that “whoever touches the altar must be holy,” because the ones touching the altar would be priests.

[For more on the translation, “Whoever touches the altar must be holy,” see commentary on Lev. 6:18.]

Exd 29:39

**“in the evening.”** See commentary on Exod. 12:6.

Exd 29:43

**“it will be made holy.”** This refers to the Tabernacle, where God was.

**“by my glory.”** In this context, God’s “glory” was the brilliant light that surrounded Him and indicated His presence. God was in the middle of the glory, which is why He spoke out of the cloud. This “cloud” covered the Tabernacle and was inside it (Exod. 40:35-36) and also filled the Temple (1 Kings 8:10-11; 2 Chron. 5:13-14). This “cloud” around God was similar to what Ezekiel saw (Ezek. 10:4; see commentary on Ezek. 1:4). In this context, “the glory of Yahweh” was the glorious light that surrounded Him. Nahum Sarna understood that in this context the “glory” was the glorious, brilliant light that surrounded God, and so his translation of the verse is: “and there I will meet with the Israelites, and it shall be sanctified by my Presence.”[[70]](#footnote-28434)

[For more on “the glory of Yahweh,” see commentary on Ezek. 1:28.]

Exd 29:46

**“They will know that I am Yahweh.”** This is better understood as, “They will experience that I am Yahweh” (see commentary on Exod. 6:7).

**Exodus Chapter 30**

Exd 30:1

**“You are to make an altar to burn incense on.”** This altar is the golden altar of incense that was inside the Tabernacle, in the Holy Place (the outer room of the Tabernacle), and it is also described in Exodus 37:25-29. The entrance to the Tabernacle always faced east, so west of the golden altar of incense was the veil that separated the Holy Place from the Holy of Holies, which was the inner room in which was the ark of the covenant. Incense was to be burned on the golden altar twice every day (Exod. 30:7-8).

**“incense.”** The incense for the golden altar of incense in the Holy Place (the outer room of the Tabernacle) was to be specially made, and made only for burning on the golden altar of incense. The incense is described in Exodus 30:34-38.

Exd 30:2

**“Its horns must be *of one piece* from it.”** This is similar to the way the great altar of sacrifice in the courtyard of the Tabernacle was made (Exod. 27:2), and also the way the atonement-cover with cherubim was made (Exod. 25:19, and cf. Exod. 25:31).

Exd 30:6

**“put it in front of the veil near the ark of the testimony.”** Put the altar of incense “in front of” (i.e., “to the east of”) the veil that separates the Holy Place from the Holy of Holies. That veil is “by” or “close to” the ark of the covenant. The veil is “in front of” the ark of the covenant, which had the atonement-cover over it—and the atonement-cover had the cherubim on it—and that is where Yahweh said he would meet with Moses and Israel (Exod. 25:22). The close proximity of the altar of incense to the ark of the covenant, and the intimate connection between them explains why Hebrews 9:4 connects the altar of incense with the Holy of Holies (see commentary on Heb. 9:4 and commentary on Exod. 40:5).

**“the testimony.”** This is another name for the Ten Commandments, which were on tablets of stone inside the ark of the covenant.

**“atonement-cover.”** Traditionally called the “mercy seat” (see commentary on Exod. 25:17).

**“over the testimony where I will meet with you.”** God met with Moses (and Israel) over the atonement-cover and between the cherubim that were on the atonement-cover (see commentary on Num. 7:89).

Exd 30:7

**“burn.”** This word occurs twice in the verse, and more literally it means “turn into smoke,” or even “turn into sweet smoke,” but it refers to burning. See commentary on Exodus 29:13.

**“Morning after morning.”** The Hebrew text repeats the word “morning” with a prefix twice, literally, “by morning by morning.” It means morning after morning—the incense was to be burned every morning, and every evening as well (Exod. 30:8).

**“tends the lamps.”** The “lamps” are the oil lamps that sit on top of the arms of the Menorah. The oil lamps had to be refilled with oil and the wicks needed to be trimmed. The Hebrew is literally, “to make good.” Aaron “makes the lamps good,” i.e., he tends them for the day.

Morning and evening were busy times at the Tabernacle and Temple. The menorah lamps had to be tended and snuffed out every morning and tended and lit every evening. At around those same times, incense had to be burned on the golden altar of incense. Meanwhile, outside the Tabernacle at around those same times, the morning and the evening sacrifice had to be offered, and on the Sabbath, there were two lambs burned in the morning and two in the evening (Num. 28:9-10).

Exd 30:8

**“lights.”** The Hebrew is more literally, “causes to go up.” When the lamps are lit, the flame and smoke go up.

**“in the evening.”** The Hebrew is literally, “between the two evenings.” The early evening started around 3 p.m. when the sun began to noticeably go down. This was the time of the evening sacrifice. The second evening is what Westerners would normally call evening, the sun was just setting until just after sunset when it was still light out.

**“he must burn it.”** More literally, “he must turn it [the golden incense altar] into smoke,” that is, he must burn the incense on it and so cover it with smoke, at which time the Holy Place would be filled with the wonderful smell of the incense. When it was time to trim and light the oil lamps for the evening, the priests were also to burn incense on the golden incense altar.

**“a regular incense.”** Incense was burned extensively in the ancient world, because, frankly, the ancient world smelled terrible (see commentary on Matt. 2:11).

Exd 30:10

**“atonement on its horns once a year.”** Aaron (or the High Priest) was to put blood on the horns of the incense altar on the Day of Atonement (Lev. 16:18).

Exd 30:12

**“take a census.”** The Hebrew is literally, “lift up the head.” That the “head,” *rosh* (#07218 רֹאשׁ) is the word related to counting or census may be part of the reason that the place on top of the Mount of Olives was the “place of the skull” (see commentary on Matt. 23:36, point #6).

Exd 30:13

**“half a shekel.** Roughly .2 ounces. A shekel was roughly .4 ounces (11 or 11.5 grams). See commentary on Genesis 24:22, “shekel.”

Exd 30:14

**“from 20 years old and over.”** Twenty years old was considered to be of military age; able to go to war and fight.

Exd 30:16

**“appoint it for the service of the Tent of Meeting.”** The money (which was silver) was used to make the silver bases for the Tabernacle and veil (Exod. 38:27). It seems this was to be a one-time offering to build the Tabernacle. However, later on in Israel’s history, this was taken to refer to annual dues (perhaps from 2 Kings 12:4, and perhaps substantiated in Matt. 17:24). However, that did not seem to be the intent of the law as it was given in Exodus.

**“the Tent of Meeting.”** The “Tabernacle” (“Dwelling Place”) is also referred to as the “Tent of Meeting” because it was the place where people met with God. The Hebrew phrase is *'ohel mo'ed*, in which *'ohel* (#0168 אֹהֶל) means “tent,” and is followed by *mo'ed* (#04150 מוֹעֵד or מֹעֵד), which means a “meeting” or a “place for a meeting.” Thus, the *'ohel mo'ed* is the “Tent of Meeting” (see commentary on Exod. 27:21).

Exd 30:18

**“You are to also make a basin of bronze and its base of bronze.”** The large bronze basin for washing and its base were made from the mirrors of the women who served at the entrance of the Tabernacle (Exod. 38:8).

**“for washing.”** Interestingly, nothing is said about how to go about washing or if there were towels or anything for wiping off the water. It would be very hard to change the water if it got bloody, so the priests were not to wash “in” it but “from” it (cf. Exod. 30:19; 40:31). The washing was done by using something like a ladle to get water from the basin and pour it on the people or the sacrifice.

**“You are to put it between the Tent of Meeting and the altar.”** Upon entering the Tabernacle courtyard, the first item encountered was the great altar of sacrifice. The basin for washing was placed between the altar of sacrifice and the Tabernacle because it would have been quite common for some blood or other offal to get on the priests when they sacrificed the animals and they were not to go into the Tabernacle (or Temple) without being ritually clean. So after being at the altar, they would wash and then be able to enter the Tabernacle.

Exd 30:19

**“wash...from it.”** Moses, Aaron, and the priests took water from the bronze basin and washed with that water that was “from it.” The priests did not wash “in” the basin, but with water “from” the basin (cf. Exod. 40:31).

Exd 30:20

**“go into the Tent of Meeting.”** When the priest went into the Tabernacle (the Holy Place) to minister, for example, to tend the menorah or table of the Bread of the Presence, he needed to wash with water. Similarly, even if he ministered at the altar of sacrifice in the Temple courtyard he had to wash with water.

**“burn.”** More literally, “to turn into smoke.” See commentary on Exodus 29:13.

Exd 30:21

**“for him and for his seed.”** That is, for Aaron and for his descendants. The descendants of Aaron were the priests.

Exd 30:23

**“shekels.”** A shekel was roughly .4 ounces (11 or 11.5 grams). See commentary on Genesis 24:22, “shekel.”

**“fine-grained myrrh.”** Myrrh is a tree sap that runs as a liquid out of the tree but then quickly hardens. But God did not want lumps of myrrh in the incense, He wanted the incense to be mixed well, so the clumps of myrrh would have to be ground up into fine-flowing granules.

Exd 30:26

**“the ark of the testimony.”** The ark of the covenant held the Ten Commandments, so it was also referred to as the “ark of the testimony.”

Exd 30:27

**“the table.”** That is, the table on which was the Bread of the Presence.

Exd 30:28

**“the *bronze* basin with its base.”** This is the large bronze basin that was in the courtyard of the Tabernacle and was used for washing (cf. Exod. 30:18; 38:8).

Exd 30:29

**“Whoever.”** The Hebrew can be translated as “whoever” or “whatever.” But the context points to “whoever” being the correct interpretation. It was Aaron and his sons (later expanded to Aaron and his descendants as the family grew) who were set apart by God to be priests. Exodus 29:44 says, “I will set apart the Tent of Meeting and the altar as holy. Also, Aaron and his sons I will set apart as holy to serve me as priests.”

[For more on the translation, “Whoever touches them must be holy,” see commentary on Lev. 6:18.]

Exd 30:30

**“serve me as priests.”** There is no specific word for “serve” in the Hebrew text, the concept comes from the verb.

Exd 30:32

**“*unauthorized* man.”** The word “man” is accurate. The anointing oil was specifically for the priests, who were all men. The Hebrew is more literally, “the flesh of man,” but when considered in the context, the only men who could be anointed were the priests, every other man was unauthorized. That becomes clear when reading the two verses, Exodus 30:32-33, together.

**“you must not make anything like it in its composition.”** We learn from neuroscience that smell is very specific and can trigger powerful memories. God wanted the smell of the Tabernacle and the priests to be very specific and bring memories and associations of God and the Tabernacle/Temple to the minds of the people when they smelled that very specific smell. This same thing was true of the holy incense (Exod. 30:37).

Exd 30:33

**“unauthorized.”** In this context, the Hebrew word translated as “unauthorized” referred to anyone who was not specifically authorized to mix the special anointing oil or be anointed with it. There were several things about the Tabernacle, and later the Temple, that were restricted to authorized people only.

Exd 30:34

**“onycha.”** The NET text note reads, “This may be a plant, or it may be from a species of mollusks; it is mentioned in Ugaritic and Akkadian; it gives a pungent odor when burnt.”

**“galbanum.”** The *HALOT* Hebrew English lexicon says, “foul-smelling resin from three species of the genus Ferula.”

Exd 30:36

**“grind.”** Spices were ground with a mortar and pestle. There was a grinding/beating action that turned the spices into the powder that could be mixed with food or burned as incense.

**“in front of the testimony.”** The ark of the covenant with the tablets containing the Ten Commandments was sometimes referred to as “the testimony” because it testified to the covenant that God and Israel made with each other (Exod. 24:3-8). The incense was to be burned “in front of the testimony,” that is, in the golden altar of incense that was in front of (east of), but close to, the veil that separated the Holy Place from the Holy of Holies.

**“where I will meet with you.”** God would meet with Israel between the cherubim over the atonement-cover, which was the lid over “the testimony” (cf. Num. 7:89).

Exd 30:37

**“you must not make for yourselves using this same composition.”** See commentary on Exod. 30:32.

**Exodus Chapter 31**

Exd 31:3

**“the spirit of God.”** This is the third occurrence of “the spirit of God” in the Bible. It is clear from this verse that the “spirit of God” is not a “Person” in the Trinity, but is spirit (the nature of God) that God puts on certain people in order for them to be able to serve God more efficaciously. The NET text note reads, “The expression in the Bible means that the individual was given special, supernatural enablement to do what God wanted done. It usually is said of someone with exceptional power or ability.”

[For more information on the spirit of God and the difference between “Holy Spirit” and “holy spirit” see Appendix 7: “What is the Holy Spirit?”]

Exd 31:7

**“the Tent of Meeting.”** The “Tabernacle” (“Dwelling Place”) is also referred to as the “Tent of Meeting” because it was the place where people met with God. The Hebrew phrase is *'ohel mo'ed*, in which *'ohel* (#0168 אֹהֶל) means “tent,” and is followed by *mo'ed* (#04150 מוֹעֵד or מֹעֵד), which means a “meeting” or a “place for a meeting.” Thus, the *'ohel mo'ed* is the “Tent of Meeting” (see commentary on Exod. 27:21).

**“atonement-cover.”** Traditionally called the “mercy seat” (see commentary on Exod. 25:17). Although the atonement-cover is the lid of the ark of the covenant and is usually listed with it, it is treated as a separate piece of the Tabernacle furnishings, and not as part of the ark of the covenant.

Exd 31:8

**“the table.”** This is the table of the Bread of the Presence.

Exd 31:9

**“the *bronze* basin with its base.”** This is the large bronze basin that was in the courtyard of the Tabernacle and was used for washing (cf. Exod. 30:18; 38:8).

Exd 31:10

**“the garments for officiating.”** This phrase is only used four times in the Old Testament: Exod. 31:10; 35:19; 39:1, 41.

Exd 31:11

**“the anointing oil.”** This was the special anointing oil that was to be used to anoint the priests and the Tabernacle with its furnishings (Exod. 30:22-33).

**“the incense of fragrant spices for the Holy Place.”** This incense is the special incense that was burned on the golden altar of incense in the outer room of the Tabernacle, the Holy Place, and what it was made of is described in Exodus 30:34-38.

Exd 31:13

**“However, you are to keep my Sabbaths.”** Here, God commands the people to keep the Sabbath. The work in building the Tabernacle was important, but it was not as important as keeping the Sabbath. The work on building the Tabernacle was to stop on the Sabbath. The Jewish rabbis used this command in Exodus 31:13 to define which work was important enough to continue to be done on the Sabbath, and which work was to be stopped on the Sabbath. Thus, the rabbis had what amounted to a list of work that could be done on the Sabbath and work that could not be done on the Sabbath.

God rested on the seventh day in Genesis 2:1-3, but He did not command that anyone follow His example and rest on the seventh day until Exodus 16, when He gave the manna from heaven, and even then, He did not fully explain the Sabbath. The Sabbath became part of the Law and the Old Covenant when it was given as part of the Ten Commandments (Exod. 20:8-11).

[For more on the Sabbath, see commentary on Exod. 20:10.]

**“And you will know that I am Yahweh.”** You will experience that I am Yahweh (see commentary on Exod. 6:7).

Exd 31:14

**“defiles.”** The Hebrew means “to treat as ordinary or common.” If a person treated the Sabbath as an ordinary day, that defiled the Sabbath. The Complete Jewish Bible has, “Everyone who treats it [the Sabbath] as ordinary must be put to death.”

**“death, yes, death!”** This is the figure of speech polyptoton (see commentary on Gen. 2:16).

Exd 31:15

**“a Sabbath of complete rest.”** The Hebrew is *shabbath shabbathon*, more literally, “a Sabbath of Sabbath observance.” This is to be understood as a Sabbath in which there is Sabbath observance, or a Sabbath of complete rest (cf. “complete rest” CJB, HCSB, NAB, NET, NLT). This Hebrew phrase occurs six times in the Bible: Exodus 31:15, 35:2; Leviticus 16:31; 23:3, 32, and here in Leviticus 25:4.

[For more on the Sabbath, see commentary on Exod. 20:10.]

**“death, yes, death!”** The Hebrew text has the figure of speech polyptoton. For this translation of the Hebrew text, see commentary on Genesis 2:16.

Exd 31:16

**“The children of Israel.”** The Sabbath was part of the covenant God made with Israel, so the Sabbath was for the Israelites, not for the Gentiles.

**“keep.”** The Hebrew word also means “to guard.” The Israelites were to guard the Sabbath from being defiled. No work was to be redefined such that it encroached on the holiness of the Sabbath.

Exd 31:17

**“refreshed.”** This is not “refreshed” in the sense that God was tired from all the work He had done. This use of refreshed has the sense of the good feeling and satisfaction that a person has after a job well done. Yahweh made the earth in the six days described in Genesis 1:3-31). When God finished His work he saw that it was very good. That kind of accomplishment gives one a very satisfied feeling. The BBE reads, that “he [God] took his rest and had pleasure in it,” and that catches the sense of the passage well.

Exd 31:18

**“he gave to Moses the two tablets of the testimony.”** This is Moses’ fifth time up Mount Sinai. Moses went up and down Mount Sinai seven times (see commentary on Exod. 19:3). Moses got the first set of tablets with the Ten Commandments on them on this fifth time up Mount Sinai, but he broke them when he saw the golden calf. The second set of the Ten Commandments was acquired on his seventh and last time up Mount Sinai.

**Exodus Chapter 32**

Exd 32:1

**“Moses delayed to come down from the mountain.”** Moses was on the mountain for 40 days and 40 nights (Exod. 24:18), so this must have been close to the end of that time, because the verse says that Moses “delayed” to come down from the mountain. The NET text note says, “The meaning of this verb is properly “caused shame,” meaning cause disappointment because he was not coming back.” Everett Fox translates the phrase, “when the people saw that Moshe was shamefully late in coming down.” The people thought, with some good reason,” that Moses would take them out of Egypt and into a land flowing with milk and honey. But now that Moses was not coming down Mount Sinai, the people thought something must have happened to him.

**“the people gathered together to Aaron.”** We learn from 1 Corinthians 10:7 that “the people” refers to only some of the people, not all of them.

In this kind of context, the Hebrew can also be translated as “gathered together against Aaron.” Aaron, as Moses’ brother, was keeping the children of Israel to the commitment they had made to keep the Ten Commandments and the other commandments given in Exodus 21-23 (cf. Exod. 24:3, 7). Yet there were evil people in the congregation, as we see from the other records of the Wilderness Wanderings, and those evil people resisted God and His laws, and of course, the leaders who supported those laws. It is a sad reality that genuinely evil people exist, and those people stand against God and his people and will take advantage of any weakness in God's leaders. With Moses gone, the people gathered against Aaron, no doubt at the instigation of the evil people in the congregation.

**“gods.”** The Hebrew word translated as “gods” is *elohim* and it can be translated as “gods” or “a god.” However, the accompanying verb “will go” is plural, so it is best to understand *elohim* here in Exodus 32:1 as a plural noun. Thus, it seems that the people wanted to have a number of gods to be with them, but Aaron started by making just one god. However, the people certainly had other gods with them that they brought from Egypt (Josh. 24:14; Ezek. 20:7-8).

The gods the Israelites brought with them out of Egypt would likely have been made of silver and gold because, when Israel left Egypt, they took much of the wealth of Egypt with them. There would have been plenty of gold for things like this golden calf, as well as the gold that went into building the Tabernacle.

**“that will go before us.”** Here we learn the “reason” that evil people could stir up the congregation to stand against Aaron and disobey God’s commandments: Moses had promised to take the people to a land “flowing with milk and honey,” but said nothing about camping without moving for over a month (cf. Exod. 13:3-5). The people wanted the easy life that Moses had spoken of, and were anxious to get going. Moses, for a reason unknown to them, went up Mount Sinai but never came down. So if Moses and *elohim* (or Yahweh) were not going to take them to the Promised Land, then they wanted Aaron to make a god for them that would “go before” them into the land.

**“we do not know what has happened to him.”** Very true. The people did not know what happened to Moses. Furthermore, they had never expected him to be gone so long. And beyond that, they had been frightened by God (Exod. 19:16; 20:18-20) and could have well thought that Moses was dead. In the ancient world, gods were not considered safe. They could help people, but they could also turn on people and hurt them. That fact is clearly expressed in the way the Hebrew text of the Old Testament is written, and in spite of the teaching of the New Testament, many people today still feel that God often causes problems for people.

Exd 32:2

**“Take off.”** It may be that Aaron was hoping the people would not want to give up their personal jewelry and would therefore not go forward with their demand to make an idol of gold, but that is conjecture. What is not conjecture is that Aaron should have never given in to the people’s demands. He should have stood firmly on the covenant agreement that the Israelites had made with God only about a month earlier (Exod. 24:2-8). Making an idol god was a sin that Aaron should have never let the people commit, and it eventually had deadly consequences. For one thing, about 3,000 people were killed as part of the fallout from that sin (Exod. 32:28).

The verb translated as “take off” is not the normal word for taking off something, but implies urgency and even some rash action. So, for example, the ASV has “break off,” the CJB has “strip off,” and the LSB has “tear off.” However, those words may imply a rough action that is more than the text is indicating. The text is likely trying to communicate that the action was to be done quickly, without hesitation, for example, “take off quickly, right now.”

**“that are in the ears of your wives, of your sons and of your daughters.”** The people had a lot of gold that they gave to build the Tabernacle, and it seems likely that quite a few of them would have had some gold without having to use the gold of their earrings. It seems Aaron could have simply said, “Everyone bring some gold to me.” It is possible that Aaron thought that by this request for their gold earrings, there would be such a large outcry and complaint that the people would be dissuaded from their goal to make a god. If so, the ploy did not work. In any case, the fact that Aaron did not stand more strongly against the people and went ahead and made an idol god made Yahweh very angry and could have led to Aaron’s death, but Moses prayed for him (Deut. 9:20).

Exd 32:3

**“the people took off the golden rings that were in their ears.”** Ordinarily, people would be very attached to their personal dress and jewelry, but it was likely that they were being strongly persuaded to make a god that would go ahead of them and thus lead them into the easy life in the Promised Land, and it was their desire for an easier life that led them to comply with Aaron’s request so quickly. It helps to remember that the people had been slaves in Egypt and lived a hard life there, and now were in the desert, which was likely a challenging life as well. In that light, trading your jewelry for an easy life does not seem to be that difficult a decision.

Exd 32:4

**“engraving tool.”** The exact nature of this tool is not known, and the translations vary, e.g., “engraving tool” (CSB), “graving tool” (ESV), “chisel” (Darby), “melted it down in a mold” (NJB; cf. NRSV). There is no way to tell from the Hebrew text whether the calf was made of pure gold or was simply gold leaf over a wooden idol. However, the fact that Aaron fashioned it with a tool and the fact that Moses burned it provide some support that it was gold leaf over a wood frame.

**“made it into a metal calf.”** The Hebrew word translated “calf” simply means “young bull,” but how young is not implied in the noun. In any case, the word “calf” may imply that what Aaron made was very young, but that did not need to be the case.

Animals were worshiped in Egypt (Exod. 8:26), and it seems the bull was a symbol of strength and virility. This calf did not have to be very big; in fact, it likely could not have been very big because it would have weighed too much to easily be made to “go ahead” of the Israelites. This would have been a small statue symbolic of the god.

**“These are your gods.”** The Hebrew word translated as “god” is *elohim*, which is always plural, so whether it should be translated as a singular “god” (or God) or a plural, as “gods,” is often determined by the verb that is associated with the noun *elohim*. In this case, the verb “brought up” is plural, so the word *elohim* should be translated as a plural.

That the Israelites would say, “these are your gods” while looking at the golden calf can be confusing, but it is what the text says. Rabbi Umberto Cassuto explains: “Scripture does not attribute to the children of Israel the foolish idea that it was the calf that had just now been fashioned that brought them up from the land of Egypt; they could not possibly have forgotten what Moses had caused them to see and hear in the name of the Lord. The meaning of this proclamation is that they regarded the calf as an emblem of the Lord, and they considered this emblem itself worthy of divine honor, thus making the calf a partner, as it were, of the Lord. Hence the plural.[[71]](#footnote-12218) On the other hand, however, Keil and Delitzsch assert that the plural is a plural of majesty, and thus the meaning is “This is your god, O Israel.”[[72]](#footnote-11488) But the work of recent Hebrew scholars points out that this is not the case because the plural verb, not the noun, determines that this is indeed a plural meaning (see commentary on Gen. 1:26, “us”).

In stating “These are your gods,” while referring to the golden calf, Aaron was breaking the first of the Ten Commandments: “I am Yahweh your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of a house of slavery, you must not have any other gods besides me” (Exod. 20:2-3; Deut. 5:6-7). So, if Aaron was saying that this god is not Yahweh but it is the god—or a helper god—who brought the people out of Egypt, then Israel does indeed have another god besides Yahweh.

If, on the other hand, Aaron was claiming that this calf god was in fact Yahweh, the Yahweh that brought Israel out of Egypt, then he is still breaking the first commandment, but in another way—he is calling an idol god “Yahweh.” That is also forbidden in the first commandment (see commentary on Exod. 20:3, “besides me”).

In this incident, we see one of the desires of the Devil, which is to pervert the worship of the One True God. At this early date, soon after the Exodus, the people likely could not forget the fact that it was Yahweh who brought them out of the land of Egypt. So the Devil could not expunge Yahweh from their minds. However, he could introduce the image of a calf and instigate people implying that the idol calf was the God—Yahweh—that brought Israel out of the land of Egypt. The Devil is still doing the same thing today. When he cannot get rid of God, he changes the image or character of God in the minds of the people so that people have a false conception of God.

**“O Israel.”** This is evidence that it was the Israelites who were pressuring Aaron to make them gods, not the mixed multitude of Gentiles among them.

Exd 32:5

**“he built an altar in front of it.”** Aaron purposely built an altar on which to sacrifice animals in front of the golden calf idol. It is only by the mercy of God that he lived (cf. Exod. 22:20; Deut. 9:20). The Tabernacle, with its courtyard and altar, had not been built yet. This was the first year of the Wilderness Wanderings, and the Tabernacle was set up on the first day of the first month of the second year of the wilderness journey (Exod. 40:1).

**“Tomorrow will be a feast to Yahweh.”** Why would Aaron say this? The golden calf was not Yahweh, and Aaron was breaking the first of the Ten Commandments (see commentary on Exod. 32:2 and 20:3).

Sadly, throughout history, people have made “God” to be what they wanted Him to be. In the Bible, God says who He is, how He is to be worshiped, and what a person is to do to be obedient to Him. But people do not read the Bible. Instead, they do what they want to and say they “love God” and believe in Him. People can get away with that on this earth today, but there is a Day of Judgment coming when people will be judged by God’s actual standards, not by the man-made standards that people call God’s standards. That will be a bad time for a lot of people.

Exd 32:6

**“They rose up early on the next day.”** The people would have had to have gotten up early anyway to gather the manna before the sun got hot when it melted (Exod. 16:11-35), so why say this? It was to show the eagerness with which the children of Israel desired to participate in the activities associated with their sacrifices, which included eating and drinking, and sexual frolicking afterward.

**“the people sat down to eat and to drink.”** The people sacrificed the animals and ate the meat the animals provided. The rules from God to Moses as to what sacrifices and what part of the sacrifices the people got to eat had not yet been given, but were mainly given later in Exodus and in Leviticus. So at this point, the people were merely following ancient custom.

**“to play.”** The Hebrew word is general and can refer to different types of play, including singing and dancing, but the context almost certainly involves sexual play as well, which was standard in the worship of a fertility god. Sexual revelry broke out later in the wilderness wanderings as well (Num. 25:1-15). It seems if all the people did was dance before the idol, the text would have used a more specific word, and besides, the Israelites could sing and dance before Yahweh if all they wanted to do was to sing and dance. But in contrast to an Egyptian bull god that would have encouraged all kinds of sexual activity, God, in the Book of the Covenant that the Israelites had just agreed to, was very pure when it came to sex. Marry, do not commit adultery, do not covet your neighbor’s wife, etc.

The golden calf idol no doubt came from the many years Israel had spent in Egypt, and the worship of the bull god Apis was very popular in Egypt, although the bull gods of Mnevis and Buchis were also worshiped. The bull was a symbol of fertility and strength, and was also linked with the afterlife. The fact that the Israelites made a calf god is more good evidence that sex was a prime motivator in the making of this particular god and that the worship of it would have involved sexual activity.

Exd 32:7

**“Go, get down!”** The Hebrew text has two imperative verbs. Deuteronomy 9:12, recounting the incident, adds “quickly.” It was a hike down the mountain, and Moses needed to act as quickly as possible before the idolatry and sin going on among the Israelites got worse.

**“For your people who you brought up out of the land of Egypt.”** God distances Himself from Israel by saying that they were Moses’ people and he brought them up from Egypt.

**“wrought corruption!”** The people had “wrought corruption.” It was not just themselves that they corrupted (or “ruined”), it was themselves, and the covenant, and their relation with God, and so much of what had been accomplished since the Exodus. Many English versions add a verb, such as “acted corruptly” (cf. CSB, NAB, NASB2020, NET, NRSV), but the text points to things being corrupted or ruined. Similarly, the translation “corrupted themselves” is not as good, because even though the people had corrupted themselves, there was more that they corrupted.

Exd 32:8

**“They have turned aside quickly.”** Indeed, Israel had turned away from God quickly. It had been about a month since they had made a blood covenant to obey God (Exod. 24:3, 7). God treated Israel as a whole, even though only some of the Israelites had sinned. We see that plurality in the plural verbs God used in the text: “They [plural] have turned aside...I commanded them [plural]. They have made [plural]...and [they] have bowed down to it[[73]](#footnote-31832) and [they] have sacrificed to it, and [they] said, ‘These are your gods, O Israel, that brought you [plural] up out of the land of Egypt.’” That God generally treats nations, clans, and groups as one whole and not “individuals” is an important reason that we Christians should speak up when we see sin and do what we can to bring the group back to godly beliefs and practices. Salvation is an individual choice, but here on earth groups are often treated as whole units.

**“bowed down.”** The common biblical way of bowing down before people or God was to fall to one’s knees and bow the upper body to the earth. It is the same Hebrew word as “worship.”

[For more on bowing down, see Word Study: “Worship.”]

**“these...brought you up.”** This is one plural pronoun and one plural verb (“brought you up”) in the Hebrew text, which sets the context that *elohim* should be plural.

Exd 32:9

**“I have seen this people.”** God is expressing to Moses that He knows what the Israelites are like. He has been watching them for a long time. Thus, when He describes them as “stiff-necked,” He knows what He is talking about.

Here in Exodus 32:9, and in some other verses in this record, the Hebrew text uses singular nouns and verbs, (e.g., “this people” [singular]). The nation of Israel was a singular people, and “it” is stiff-necked.

**“they are a stiff-necked people.”** The idiomatic expression, “stiff-necked,” seems to come from the agricultural life the people lived, and the fact that many animals became stiff-necked and self-willed and would not submit to the yoke of their owners but were determined to do whatever they wanted and to go their own way. This is the first use of “stiff-necked” in the Bible.

Exd 32:10

**“leave me alone.”** In saying “leave me alone,” Yahweh gives Moses the key to saving Israel. If Moses will not leave God alone, but will pray and ask for the people of Israel to be spared, then God will not destroy them, and that is what happened. This is one of the many verses that speak to the power of prayer. What God is doing here is asking for Moses to pray and intercede for Israel. This is also a kind of test for Moses, to reveal his character.

**“and I will make you become a great nation.”** God could have built a numerous nation from Moses, who could still have children, but if He destroyed Israel He could not have fulfilled the prophecies about the Messiah coming from the line of Judah (Gen. 49:8-12).

We do not normally think of God as having emotional outbursts, but Exodus 32:7-10 seems to be just that. This is more of God expressing Himself in ways that help us understand Him, for example, that He really does have feelings and emotions. God really does expect us to love Him for all He does, has done, and will do, and when we turn our backs on Him it genuinely hurts Him. We are created in God’s image, and that includes having emotions.

Exd 32:11

**“Moses soothed the face of Yahweh.”** The Hebrew text is idiomatic, and uses language that refers to Moses calming Yahweh down. His face was angry against Israel, but Moses calmed Him down. English versions typically translate the Hebrew idiom into more common English, but in this case the Hebrew idiom is clear enough to be left in the English translation.

**“why does your wrath burn hot against your people.”** At first, this question seems somewhat nonsensical because God had just told Moses why He was angry: Israel had quickly turned away from God and made an idol and called it “Yahweh” and worshiped it. But Moses’ point is more subtle than that. God had told Moses that He knew the people (“I have seen this people”) and knew that they were stiff-necked. So God should have known that the people would be hard to work with and it would take great patience, love, and mercy to work with them and eventually bring the Messiah from them. So Moses begins to soothe God, first by reminding Him that Israel is His people and He brought them out of Egypt. Then Moses gave God other reasons to forebear His judgment, including that the Egyptians would speak against God, and God would not be able to fulfill the promises He had made to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. Moses’ intercession worked, and God changed His mind about what He would do to Israel.

Exd 32:12

**“say, yes, say.”** The verb “say” is repeated for emphasis, but in different aspects of the verb. The first “say” is an imperfect verb and the second is an infinitive verb. That duplication is the figure of speech polyptoton (see commentary on Gen. 2:16).

**“change your mind about.”** The Hebrew word translated “change your mind” is *nacham* (#05162 נָחַם), and here it refers to God changing His mind. God interacts with people and will sometimes change His mind and course of action if people have a change of heart and action (see commentary on Jer. 18:8; cf. CEB, GNV, NAB, NASB, NLT, NRSV).

Exd 32:13

**“to whom you swore by your own self.”** God swears by His own self when He wants His purpose to be immutable and carried out fully (Gen. 22:16-18; cf. Heb. 6:13). Moses’ words were very powerful in this context because Israel had just made a blood covenant with God to keep His commandments and broke that covenant in just over a month, so now Moses presses in to convince God to be good for His end of the covenant because of what God had said to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob (“Israel”).

Exd 32:14

**“changed his mind about.”** The Hebrew word translated “changed his mind” is *nacham* (#05162 נָחַם), and here it refers to God changing His mind. God interacts with people and will sometimes change His mind and course of action if people have a change of heart and action (see commentary on Jer. 18:8; cf. CEB, CJB, GNV, NAB, NASB, NLT, NRSV). This event is a wonderful example of how God can be merciful simply because of someone’s earnest prayer and request, and not because someone offered a sacrifice of some kind. David said it well in Psalm 51, after he had had sex with Bathsheba and had her husband Uriah killed, that what God really wanted was a humble and contrite heart, not an animal sacrifice (Ps. 51:16-17).

Exd 32:15

**“Then Moses turned.”** It seems that Moses was facing into the mountain and into God’s presence on it when he was conversing with God, and so now he turned around to face away from the mountain and out over the Israelites.

**“and went down from the mountain.”** This was Moses’ fifth time down Mount Sinai.

[For more on Moses’ seven trips up Mount Sinai, see commentary on Exod. 19:3.]

**“with the two tablets of the testimony in his hand.”** God had told Moses much earlier that He would give Moses tablets with the commandments (referring to the Ten Commandments) written on them (Exod. 24:12). That is why the text can say, “the” two tablets. These are the tablets God spoke of earlier.

Exd 32:17

**“the sound of the people as they shouted.”** The Hebrew treats the nation as a singular: “the sound of the people (singular) as it (singular) shouted.” There would have been people in the camp who did not agree with what the majority of the people were doing in worshiping the golden calf, but Israel as a whole had made a covenant with God, and now God treats them as one whole group. It is a sad fact that many people on earth suffer because of the ungodly people around them. It is especially the case that if the leadership of a nation or group is ungodly, the people suffer. Many verses in this section treat Israel as a singular group (e.g., Exod. 32:17, 21, 22, 25).

**“The sound of war is in the camp!”** This is a natural reaction to the tumult in the camp. It never would have occurred to a godly man like Joshua that the people, being led by Aaron, would so completely turn from the covenant they had made only just over a month earlier and that they had made an idol and were having something that resembled an unruly feast complete with sexual misconduct.

Exd 32:18

**“Moses said.”** The Hebrew text is “he said,” but since the last one to speak was Joshua, using “he” would have been confusing. The REV and a number of other English versions substitute “Moses” for “he” here in Exodus 32:18.

Exd 32:19

**“Moses’ anger burned.”** An idiom for the fact that Moses became very angry. When someone gets very angry their skin flushes and they get physically hot.

In a way, it is ironic that Moses had just calmed God down when God was going to destroy the people for their sin, and now Moses is so angry he smashed the tablets with the Ten Commandments and then commanded that people who were being unruly be killed, and about 3,000 men were killed (Exod. 32:27-28).

**“and he threw the tablets out of his hands.”** This record of Moses is very human and gives us an example of how human emotion often works. God had already told Moses that the people had made a gold calf god and were worshiping it (Exod. 32:7-8), so Moses knew intellectually what the people were doing. But there is a big difference between “head knowledge” and actually experiencing something. In this case, although Moses knew the people had made a gold calf god and were worshiping it, when he actually saw what the people were doing he was filled with emotion and threw down the stone tablets God had made and broke them. In the same way, most everyone has examples of times in life when we know about something that is bad or evil and yet can “keep it together” and not become overly emotional, but then when we come face to face with the bad thing we are overcome with emotion. That is a typically human trait.

We can understand why Moses would feel the way he did and break the tablets. The very first two commandments were “I am Yahweh your God...You must not have any other gods besides me. You must not make for yourself a carved image...you must not bow down to them and you must not serve them….” (Exod. 20:2-5). The people of Israel agreed to those commandments and made a covenant with God that they would obey them, and got sprinkled with covenant blood (Exod. 24:7-8). Furthermore, God had shown the leaders of Israel that He was on the mountain with Moses (Exod. 24:9-11). But now, after only a month or so of Moses being gone the Israelites completely abandoned the commitment they had made to God and turned to idols (Moses was gone for 40 days, but it would have taken a while to convince Aaron to make the calf god and then to actually make it and begin worship ceremonies, so it was likely a month or even less that Moses was gone when the process started).

There is also strong evidence that sexual activity that God would never tolerate was a prime motivator in the people making a calf god, which means that the people not only ignored the commandments they had agreed to about not making idols, they also ignored God’s commands about sexual purity (see commentary on Exod. 32:6). In any case, when Moses actually saw for himself what the people were doing and realized that the people had broken many of the commandments that they had agreed to and some of which were written on the very tablets Moses was carrying, he was furious and broke the tablets because at that moment it must have seemed to Moses that the covenant was pointless.

**“at the foot of the mountain.”** The Hebrew text literally reads, “under” or “beneath” the mountain, but it means “at the foot of.” Saying “under the mountain” would be unclear in English. Moses broke the tablets with the Ten Commandments, which represent the covenant Israel made with God in the same place that Israel had made that covenant with God some 40 days earlier (Exod. 24:4).

Exd 32:20

**“the surface of the water.”** The Hebrew text literally reads, “the face of the water,” but in this context the word “face” means surface. The surface of the water is called the “face” of the water because that is the part that we see, just like when we look at a person the part we see is the face, not what is behind it.

**“and made the children of Israel drink it.”** There seems to be an intentional parallel here between the “adultery” that Israel committed against Yahweh by worshiping a pagan god, and the punishment of a woman suspected of adultery in Numbers 5:11-31. In Numbers 5, there is a strange procedure in which a woman who is suspected of adultery has to drink some water that is mixed with dust from the “floor” (the ground) of the Tabernacle, and how that drink affects her reveals if she committed adultery or not. Here in Exodus 32, Israel had openly committed adultery against Yahweh and made a golden calf, and Moses ground the gold to powder and scattered it on the water and made Israel drink it—although the effect that drink had on the people is not spoken about in the text.

One thing that the parallel between Exodus 32:20 and Numbers 5:11-31 reveals is that the nature of the covenant that God made with Israel at Mount Sinai was a marriage covenant. That fact shows up in different ways in the Old Testament. For example, in Jeremiah 31:32, God says that because He made that covenant with Israel, He was a “husband” to them. Also, Israel’s worship of other gods besides Yahweh is referred to as adultery (cf. Jer. 3:8; Hos. 1:2), and when God finally leaves Israel, He speaks of giving her a bill of divorce (Isa. 50:1; Jer. 3:8).

Exd 32:21

**“What did these people do to you.”** Moses expected that the people must have threatened Aaron with some horrible fate for Aaron to give in to such a great sin. Moses did not expect Aaron to be so weak. We just don’t really know what is in people until they have been tested. When Aaron was tested, he failed.

**“these people…them.”** Here again, the people of Israel are considered together as a single group in the Hebrew text, which reads, “this people...it” (see commentary on Exod. 32:17).

**“a great sin.”** The Hebrew text ends with “great sin,” giving it some emphasis (although the grammar of the Hebrew text is normal and puts the adjective last, literally, “sin great.” Some sins are more serious than others (see commentary on Exod. 32:31).

Exd 32:22

**“You yourself know this people.”** Even with the threat of the people gone now that Moses was present, Aaron is still weak-minded. He will not own his failure, and instead, he blames the people.

**“set on evil.”** The Hebrew text is literally, “they are in evil.” The Hebrew text is likely pointing to more than simply that the people were prone to evil. We know from other verses that the people had idols with them when they came out of Egypt. So in one sense they may have already been involved in the evil of idolatry and Aaron would say you know the people that they are in evil.

**“they are.”** The Hebrew text reads “it is” (singular), showing that Aaron thought of the people as a single group with a singular purpose (see commentary on Exod. 32:17).

Exd 32:23

**“Make us gods.”** For the translation “gods,” see commentary on Exodus 32:1.

Exd 32:24

**“and out came this calf.”** This is a bald-faced lie but a strange one. Why would Aaron say such a thing? For one thing, it got the pressure off of Aaron, after all, he did not make the calf, it made itself! Is it possible that Aaron said that to indicate that maybe the calf was a god after all? We just don’t know why Aaron said what he did.

Aaron’s answer to Moses reveals how weak humans can be, especially if they are unexpectedly caught doing something they know is wrong. Aaron was normally a good man, but he had given in to the crowd and made an idol, and now Moses was trying to get him to admit it, not to shame him (although it would cause shame), but to get him to confess and repent. Sadly, at this time Aaron’s sin was still so fresh that he could not admit it. Moses realized that and moved on. It is likely, but never stated, that Moses revisited this issue with Aaron at a later time.

Aaron’s actions were human; Moses’ action was wise. It is not wise to press a person on an issue at a time when they just cannot mentally handle it. Deal with the problem later, like Moses did.

Exd 32:25

**“that they were running wild.”** The exact meaning of the Hebrew word translated as “running wild” is difficult to determine, and the versions vary. English translations include “broken loose” (ESV, RSV); “had gotten out of control” (CEB, CSB, JPS, NASB, NIV), “running wild” (NAB, NET, NRSV); “were unrestrained” (TLV). The idea is that the people had broken loose from the moral and ethical restraints that mature people are supposed to respect and so they were out of control and running wild. It is the responsibility of leadership to put boundaries and consequences in place so that people are safe and orderly.

The Hebrew text treats the people as a singular group, more literally reading, “that it was” instead of “that they were.”

**“for Aaron had let them run wild.”** This is the hard truth of the situation. The people were out of control because Aaron had let them get out of control. Leaders must learn to lead with a strong hand when it is necessary. A strong hand was needed at this time in Israel, and for whatever reason, Aaron did not exercise that strong hand.

**“resulting in their being a laughingstock.”** The Hebrew verb only occurs here in the Bible, so the English translations vary greatly, and the exact meaning is debated. The sin of Israel made Israel, and seemingly Yahweh as well, a laughingstock and an object of derision among their enemies.

Exd 32:26

**“Moses stood at the entrance of the camp.”** The Bible does not describe which entrance, and the camp seems to have had at least four, one on each side. Logically, it would have been the side between Mount Sinai and the camp of Israel, but which side that was is not known.

**“And all the sons of Levi gathered to him.”** This is how the Levites got to be in charge of the things of God such as the Tabernacle and Temple.

Exd 32:27

**“He said to them, ‘This is what Yahweh, the God of Israel, says.’”** This command to kill the idolaters came from God, not from Moses’ anger.

**“from gate to gate.”** It is not clear whether this is literal or not. The different tribes camped in a very purposeful and prearranged order, and it is possible that they separated their tribal areas with some kind of gate structure. However, the “gates” between the tribal areas may have been more figurative, not literal.

**“Every man kill his brother...neighbor...relative.”** The repetition of “every man,” and the people who are to be killed for breaking the blood covenant, the brother, friend, and neighbor, emphasizes the horror and the seriousness of the situation. Modern sensibilities might be horrified and offended at this killing, but this was not done just because Moses was angry. Moses had interceded for Israel before and would in the future. Exodus 32:27 makes it clear that this killing was done at the command of God. More clearly than anyone else, God realized that at this early stage of the formation of Israel as a nation made up of confederate tribes, if people were allowed to worship idols and openly engage in sin, defying God’s commands, there would be a huge toll on human life on the Day of Judgment. Many people who could have lived forever would be thrown into the Lake of Fire. Sadly, the bloody solution was to kill the rebels and work to maintain the purity of the people in the eyes of God.

Although we today, in the Administration of Grace and the New Covenant, do not kill people who openly defy God, the world is not better off because of that. Huge numbers of people are led into sin by overt teaching and examples. Only the Day of Judgment itself will show how many people who might have taken God seriously and gotten saved if they had good examples to follow, were led away from God and Christ by the open disobedience of others and will suffer everlasting death because of it.

Exd 32:29

**“you have been ordained to Yahweh.”** The Masoretic Hebrew text reads more like, “Ordain yourselves,” but the Septuagint and Vulgate seem to be correct, and they put the event in the past as “you have been ordained,” and the REV follows that reading. Beyond that, the Hebrew uses the idiom, “fill your hand,” thus, “You have filled your hand to Yahweh.” Worded that way, the idiom generally refers to putting your heart into doing something, so in this context “ordain” seems to be a good translation (see commentary on Exod. 28:41).

In Malachi, the Bible says that God had made a covenant with Levi (Mal. 2:4), and this seems to be the place that he did that.

[For the translation, “you have been ordained,” see Umberto Cassuto.[[74]](#footnote-30745)]

Exd 32:30

**“You have sinned.”** The Hebrew text is emphatic. Moses places the blame and responsibility squarely upon the people. This is not to unnecessarily shame them, but to get them to take responsibility for their actions so they can be forgiven. If they deny their sin they will never honestly confess it and ask for forgiveness—and then be forgiven.

**“a great sin.”** Some sins are more serious than others (see commentary on Exod. 32:31).

**“Now I will go up to Yahweh.”** Moses acts as the mediator between God and Israel. Many years later Jesus would fill that role.

**“Perhaps I will be able.”** The people had broken the blood covenant they had made with God just 40 days earlier, and so it was possible that God would not forgive that sin or maintain His relationship with Israel. People who sinned unintentionally could do a sacrifice and be forgiven, but people who sinned on purpose could not simply offer a sacrifice and be forgiven, they were to be cut off from the people (Num. 15:27-31).

Exd 32:31

**“So Moses returned to Yahweh.”** This is Moses’ sixth trip up Mount Sinai, and he went to ask God to forgive the sin of the children of Israel.

[For more information on Moses’ seven trips up Mount Sinai, see commentary on Exod. 19:3.]

**“sinned a great sin.”** All sin is sin, and any sin has to be atoned for if the sinner is to have everlasting life. However, there are sins that are worse than others. In this case, the sin of the people has led to the death of many of the people, and that, along with breaking a number of the commandments that they had agreed to obey, was a “great” sin.

Exd 32:32

**Yet now, if you would only forgive their sin…!** Moses cannot finish his sentence. This is the figure of speech aposiopesis, where a person speaking does not finish their sentence for any of a number of reasons.[[75]](#footnote-27038) Moses knows that Israel has sinned purposely and egregiously, and he cannot quite bring himself to end his sentence by saying something like, “I know they will do better” or “things will be fine, you’ll see,” because he knows the Israelites may simply continue to complain and sin, which they did. Rather, by not finishing his sentence he simply relies on the mercy of God, which God graciously gave.

**But if not, please blot me out of your book that you have written.”** This is a very powerful statement. For one thing, it lets us know that it was common knowledge in the culture that God had a “Book of Life,” and the names written in it were the names of those who on Judgment Day would be granted everlasting life (in the next verse, Exod. 32:33, God admits to having that book, and it is mentioned again in Malachi ). The Bible never says how God’s people knew there was such a book, it just lets us know that the people knew there was such a book. Of course, it makes sense that God’s people knew that some people would obey God and be granted everlasting life while other people would ignore or defy God and not be granted that life. God created people so He could have a family who loved Him and who He could love in return, and so it is perfectly logical that in the more than 2,500 years since Adam, God had revealed to people who obeyed Him that they would have everlasting life.

Exodus 32:32 also reveals Moses’ great love for Israel, even though they exhausted and exasperated him at times. He may have been exaggerating, but his heart was that if the Israelites were not going to live forever because of their sin, then he did not want to live forever without them. It was that kind of love that kept Moses going for 40 years in the wilderness with the Israelites, who seemed to complain or fall short in almost everything they did.

Exd 32:33

**“him will I blot out of my book.”** God’s answer is direct and important. The person who sins (the “him” is singular) will not be granted everlasting life. God supports individual sin or righteousness, and individual punishments or rewards.

God will not let love or sentimentality allow unrighteous people to live forever, or keep righteous people from living forever. God knows that people who are resurrected to life will at that time have a clear understanding of who has been granted everlasting life and on what basis that life was granted. In this life, a person may feel that he or she does not want to live forever without people they love being there too, but in the resurrection, people will have a clear understanding of personal choice and responsibility, and also, the Bible promises that saved people will have joy, not sorrow, in the life to come.

Exd 32:34

**“Now go, lead the people.”** This points to Moses’ sixth trip down Mount Sinai, which is not expressly stated in the Bible but which we know happened because Moses shows up with the people who are down at the base of Mount Sinai.

[For more information on Moses’ seven trips up Mount Sinai, see commentary on Exod. 19:3.]

**“my angel will go before you.”** God, in His mercy, apparently to some extent restores the situation that existed before Israel sinned: God’s angel will go ahead of Israel and will lead them into the Promised Land (Exod. 23:20-23). However, God Himself would not go with them because their sin might cause Him to destroy them (Exod. 33:3).

**“in the day when I visit, I will visit their sin upon them.”** God forgave the sin of the Israelites, but it still had consequences. In the war between Good and Evil, between God and the Devil, when God’s people sin it opens up the door for the Devil to afflict them, and he did. The text uses the common idiom of permission and words the text as if God did the punishing.

When God “visited” someone, He intervened in their life, and He could intervene for the better or for the worse. God is a righteous God, and He holds people accountable for their actions. Although the word “visit” could be translated “punish” here, and many versions do that, the word “visit” shows that God does not just “punish,” He visits and evaluates the situation and then acts accordingly. In this case, however, “I will visit their sin upon them” means that God will punish people for their sin.

[For more on “visit,” see commentary on Exod. 3:16 and 20:5. For more on the idiom of permission, see commentary on Exod. 4:21.]

Exd 32:35

**“And Yahweh sent a plague on the people.”** This is the idiom of permission. Yahweh did not personally strike the people, instead, their sin opened the door for the Devil to afflict the people. However, because God put the laws in place that the people broke, in the Hebrew idiom He is held responsible.

The Hebrew word translated as “struck” is also used for a plague, which is why some Bible versions say that Yahweh “plagued” the people, and the REV and some other translations say that Israel was struck with a plague. Since Israel was not attacked by an enemy army at this time, that Israel was struck with a plague is the most logical explanation of what happened, especially since “struck” can mean “struck with a plague.”

[For more on the idiom of permission, see commentary on Exod. 4:21.]

**“they made the calf, the one that Aaron made.”** This sounds a little strange to us in English, but it expresses a powerful truth, especially when we understand the history of the golden calf. Moses had been gone for some time, and so the people came to Aaron, who was in charge, and told him to make them gods, ostensibly to “go before us,” and thus lead us into the Promised Land (Exod. 32:1). However, given the thousands of gods of Egypt, it was no accident that a calf god, a fertility god, was chosen, because the worship of it then involved the people in sex, which they almost certainly wanted anyway (see commentary on Exod. 32:6, “play”).

From God’s perspective, it was the people who pressured Aaron into making the calf, and they are responsible for that. Thus, they “made the calf.” However, Aaron was actually the one who took the gold from the people and fashioned a metal calf from it. The Hebrew text is written in such a way that both parties are guilty of the sin of making an idol.

**Exodus Chapter 33**

Exd 33:2

**“the Canaanite, the Amorite and the Hittite, and the Perizzite, the Hivite, and the Jebusite.”** Here God gives the names of six of the seven nations that are sometimes named. The same list is in Exodus 23:23. Deuteronomy 7:1 lists all these but adds the Girgashites. All of these tribes except the Perizzites are descended from Ham’s son Canaan, and thus all of them are included when the word “Canaanites” is used in its wider sense (and even then, the Perizzites might be generally included as inhabitants of the land of Canaan).

Exd 33:6

**“from Mount Horeb on.”** The Bible does not say how long it was before people put their jewelry back on, but it seems that eventually they did, even if it was at the end of the wilderness journey.

Exd 33:7

**“Now Moses used to take a tent and pitch it outside the camp.”** This tent is not the Tabernacle, which had not been built or set up yet. This was a regular tent where Moses and the Israelites met with God before the Tabernacle was set up. However, the Bible does not tell us how early in the year Moses set up this first “Tent of Meeting.” But in any case, since the Tabernacle was set up on the first day of the first month of the second year of the wilderness wanderings, this tent could not have been used very long. The Tabernacle, with its furniture, menorah, priests and Levites, was set up in the first month of the second year of the wilderness wanderings (Exod. 40:2, 17, 33).

**“the Tent of Meeting.”** The “Tabernacle” (“Dwelling Place”) is also referred to as the “Tent of Meeting” because it was the place where people met with God. The Hebrew phrase is *'ohel mo'ed*, in which *'ohel* (#0168 אֹהֶל) means “tent,” and is followed by *mo'ed* (#04150 מוֹעֵד or מֹעֵד), which means a “meeting” or a “place for a meeting.” Thus, the *'ohel mo'ed* is the “Tent of Meeting” (see commentaries on Exod. 25:9 and 27:21).

**“everyone who sought Yahweh.”** The word translated as “sought” is quite general in meaning and refers to things such as seeking God’s counsel or seeking help from God. We generally think of “seeking God” when we want or need something from Him.

Exd 33:10

**“bowed down.”** The common biblical way of bowing down before people or God was to fall to one’s knees and bow the upper body to the earth. It is the same Hebrew word as “worship.”

[For more on bowing down, see Word Study: “Worship.”]

Exd 33:11

**“Yahweh spoke to Moses face to face as a man speaks to his friend.”** In John 8:40 Jesus said that he was a man who told the truth the he heard from God. Centuries earlier, as we see here in Exodus 33:11, Moses did the same thing.

**“Joshua...would not leave the Tent.”** After God and Moses were done talking, Moses would return to the camp of Israel but Joshua would stay behind to guard the Tent. When the Tabernacle was set up and the Levites were assigned their specific duties, the Levites and priests would guard the Tabernacle.

Exd 33:12

**“Moses said to Yahweh.”** At this point, Moses was at the Tent of Meeting outside the camp speaking with Yahweh.

**“have known you by name.”** The Hebrew verb is a perfect tense, “have known.”

Exd 33:13

**“please show me your ways so that I may know you in order to find favor in your eyes.”** We have to remember that at this point in history very little of what we call “the Bible” was written down or even known. The Israelites had a very small piece of what is now the Book of Exodus (cf. Exod. 24:4, 7), and that included the Ten Commandments and perhaps Exodus 20-23. Today, we have the whole Bible and can learn God’s ways and what it takes to obey and please Him. People today should be like Jeremiah, who found the Word of God after it had been missing for years, and “ate it up,” saying, “Your words were found, and I ate them, and your words became a joy to me and the rejoicing of my heart” (Jer. 15:16). God’s ways are not hidden anymore, they are only hidden from people who refuse to read them.

**“this nation is your people.”** Moses reminds God that the nation of Israel is His people, not Moses’ people.

Exd 33:14

**“My presence.”** The Hebrew for “presence” is “face,” but “face” is often used idiomatically for the presence of the person.

**“will go.”** Moses’ intercession for Israel has been effective. God will go with Israel into the Promised Land.

**“I will give you rest.”** In this context, the “rest” that God gave Moses was rest from the worries, anxiety, and pressures of feeling he was on his own, trying to lead the Israelites into the Promised Land. Later in the text, the phrase “rest” often referred to being in the Promised Land, and although that may have been a secondary meaning here in Exodus 33:14, it was not the primary meaning in the context.

Exd 33:16

**“I and your people.”** Moses emphasizes that Israel is God’s people, and he wants to be assured that the people are included in God’s plan.

**“Is it not because you go with us that we are distinct.”** Israel was distinct from all the other nations, and the reason for that was their unique and special relationship with God.

Exd 33:17

**“I will do what you have asked.”** God is persuaded by Moses, again showing Moses’ mediatorial role. Moses asked that God go with them as they travel, and God said He would.

Exd 33:19

**“in front of you...before you.”** The Hebrew is idiomatic: “in front of your face...before your face.”

Exd 33:20

**“You cannot see my face.”** In the context of this verse, “face” has been used for God’s personal presence (Exod. 33:14-15), and it is likely being used that way here in Exodus 33:20. If that is the case, the meaning of the verse would be “you cannot see my personal presence,” that is, “all there is to see of me.” God had appeared to Moses in the form of a human, a form He had taken many times when He wanted to commune with people more intimately (Exod. 34:5; see commentary on Acts 7:55 and commentary on Gen. 18:1). So this is different. When Yahweh took on human form, Moses did see his face. So this use of “face” must be different. Moses is asking to see more of who God really is, and God says no human can do that and live. God ends up showing Moses some things about Himself, but not His fullness.

Exd 33:21

**“stand *​​​​​there*.”** This could have the meaning of “stand over there,” or perhaps Moses had been sitting at the time, he had been there for 40 days.

**“rock.”** The Hebrew word refers to a big rock, even a cliff face. The *HALOT* Hebrew-English lexicon suggests “rocky hill, mountain.” God is telling Moses to stand at a specific place on Mount Sinai.

Exd 33:22

**“rock.”** See commentary on Exodus 33:21. The idea of a cleft in a mountain is also in Isaiah 2:21, where sinners are hiding from the majesty of God.

Exd 33:23

**“but my face will not be seen.”** That is, the fullness of my personal presence and who I am will not be seen (see commentary on Exod. 33:20).

**Exodus Chapter 34**

Exd 34:1

**“Chisel.”** The Hebrew text is more literally “cut,” but the stone would be cut with a chisel.

**“which you broke.”** This is more than just a fact, it is a mild rebuke. The first set of tablets came from God; He cut them from the rock and wrote on them. Yes, Israel broke the covenant they made with God, but that did not give Moses the right to break the tablets. If the pieces of those broken tablets could be found today they would be more than priceless.

Exd 34:3

**“do not let the flocks or herds graze in front of that mountain.”** This command is preventative. There were no fences, and flocks of sheep and goats grazed and wandered. If a sheep or goat were to go up on the mountain the owner would feel compelled to go after it, and that could lead to his or her death.

Exd 34:4

**“went up on Mount Sinai.”** This was Moses’ seventh and final time up Mount Sinai before Israel left the area. On this trip, Moses took two stone tablets that he had chiseled out of stone to replace the ones he had broken that God had made. God wrote on the tablets (Exod. 34:28), but Moses had to chisel them out of rock and bring them to God.

As with Moses’ fifth time up Mount Sinai, Moses was there for 40 days and 40 nights (Exod. 34:28), but this time when Moses was gone the Israelites at the bottom of the mountain obeyed God and waited patiently for Moses to come down. Then, when Moses finally did come down, his face radiated (Exod. 34:29).

[For more information on Moses’ seven trips up Mount Sinai, see commentary on Exod. 19:3.]

**“and took in his hand two stone tablets.”** Although paintings of the tablets show them as being very large, there is every reason to believe they were not very big, and the fact that Moses had to carry them up to the top of Mount Sinai is good evidence they were not very big. Many tablets excavated from the ancient Near East are quite small.

Exd 34:5

**“and stood with him there.”** Exodus 34:5 causes confusion because people are taught that no one can see God, but that is not the case. God loves people and occasionally comes into concretion in human form to relate to His creation just as angels, who are normally invisible to us, sometimes make themselves visible. Just like we see God described as a person in Daniel 7:9-14, he comes into human form in other places as well. Here he came to Moses in human form and He did the same for Samuel (1 Sam. 3:10).

[For more on God appearing to people, see commentary on Acts 7:55.]

**“he called.”** The subject abruptly changes from Yahweh to Moses. Moses called upon the name of Yahweh. The Hebrew is a common form of “call on the name of Yahweh” or “call upon the name of Yahweh,” when a person or people call upon the name of Yahweh (cf. Gen. 4:26; Ps. 105:1; 116:13; Joel 2:32; 2 Kings 5:11; 1 Chron. 16:8).

In the next verse, Exodus 34:6, Yahweh speaks about His name and characteristics.

However, the Hebrew is somewhat ambiguous, and the verse could be referring to Yahweh as the one “calling out in the name of Yahweh.”

Exd 34:7

**“clear, yes, clear.”** This is the figure of speech polyptoton (see commentary on Gen. 2:16). God is a righteous God, and the judgment of the wicked is part of the believer’s future hope. Far too often evil people don’t get justice on earth, but God promises they will get justice in the future, and here He makes that very clear by putting it in the figure of speech polyptoton. God will not overlook the punishment that guilty people are due (cf. Rom. 12:19).

**“visiting the iniquity of the fathers.”** See commentary on Exodus 20:5.

Exd 34:8

**“kneeled and bowed down.”** This kneeling preceded bowing down to the ground. The two actions, kneeling and then bowing to the ground blended into one act of homage or worship. The common biblical way of bowing down before people or God was to fall to one’s knees and bow the upper body and face to the earth. Also, instead of “kneeled and bowed down,” the text could be translated “bowed down and worshiped,” with “kneeling” being understood as part of the process of bowing down, and “bowing down” was the act of worship. The same Hebrew verb, *shachah* (#07812 שָׁחָה), is translated as both “bow down” and “worship;” traditionally “worship” if God is involved and “bow down” if people are involved, but the verb and action are the same, the act of bowing down is the worship.

[For more on bowing down, see Word Study: “Worship” and commentary on 1 Chron. 29:20.]

Exd 34:9

**“let the Lord go.”** Moses addressed Yahweh in the third person, being very respectful and polite. Moses recognized the extreme importance of God being with His people. People act like they can do well in life without God, but that is not the case. People need to have God on their side to be truly prosperous in body and mind in this life and the next.

**“our iniquity and our sin.”** Here we see the love that Moses had for the Israelites and considered himself part of that group. Moses spoke of “our” iniquity and “our” sin. To Moses, the sin of the Israelites was his sin too.

Exd 34:10

**“Behold, I cut a covenant.”** This is not a brand new covenant, because the people are not asked to enter into a new covenant with Yahweh. Rather, God is establishing the covenant He made on Sinai in Exodus 24 and stating that it is still valid even though the Israelites technically broke the covenant when they made the golden calf. In this, we see God’s mercy and forgiveness. He forgave their sin and continued in relationship with them.

In this case, God actually did “cut a covenant” (Exod. 24:5-8). For more on the phrase “cut a covenant,” see commentary on Genesis 15:18.

**“created.”** The Hebrew uses a word that is only used of God. Only God can “create” in the way He does.

**“created in any land or in any of the nations.”** The Hebrew could also be “in all the earth and in all the nations.”

**“with you.”** God works along with Israel to accomplish His work. Although some modern translations say “for you” instead of “with you,” that is not the plain meaning of the Hebrew text and there is no clear reason to make the change.

Exd 34:11

**“I am driving out.”** There is a proleptic sense to the participle “driving out” that God was going to drive the Canaanites out of the Promised Land, but there is likely also a sense in which God is already working in getting the Canaanites driven out. So, for example, when the Israelites got to Jericho, the Canaanites had already heard of Yahweh and were afraid of Him.

**“the Amorite, the Canaanite, the Hittite, the Perizzite, the Hivite, and the Jebusite.”** All of these tribes except the Perizzites are descended from Ham’s son Canaan, and are thus included when “Canaanites” is used in its wider sense (and even then the Perizzites might be generally included as inhabitants of the land of Canaan. Genesis 10 says, “Canaan became the father of Sidon (his firstborn)[thus the Phoenicians], Heth [thus the Hittites], the Jebusite, the Amorite, the Girgashite, the Hivite, the Arkite, the Sinite, the Arvadite, the Zemarite, and the Hamathite” (Gen. 10:15-18).

**“Perizzite.”** A tribe of unknown origin that, in the time of Joshua, lived in the hill country of Judah and Ephraim. See commentary on Joshua 9:1.

Exd 34:12

**“cut a covenant.”** For the phrase “cut a covenant,” see commentary on Genesis 15:18.

**“or it will become a snare in your midst.”** The Israelites were to drive out the Canaanites. If they did not drive them out but made covenants with them instead, the ungodly Canaanites would be a snare to them, and indeed they were a snare. Israel unknowingly made a covenant with the Gibeonites (Josh. 9). That covenant eventually led to a three-year famine in Israel (1 Sam. 21:1-9).

Exd 34:13

**“break down.”** The Hebrew word is used for the first time here, and it can mean “break down,” “tear down,” “pull down,” “demolish,” etc. The REV generally translates it “break down.” Israel was to break down the pagan altars, but they failed to do that (Judg. 2:2).

**“dash in pieces their *sacred* standing-stones.”** Standing-stones would often be set up as part of the worship of pagan gods. But God has no tolerance for idols. They are harmful in many different ways. They are to be destroyed.

[For more on standing-stones, see commentary on Gen. 28:18. For more on idols being harmful, see commentary on Deut. 7:5.]

**“cut down their Asherah *poles*.”** The fact that the Asherah poles were to be “cut down,” indicates that in this location they were generally made of wood.

In the Canaanite religion, Asherah was a fertility goddess. She was often understood to be the wife of “El” a major god (sometimes the top God) of the Canaanites, although she was sometimes associated with Baal and the worship of Baal. The worship of Asherah was often overtly sexual and often involved ritual sex. It is important to realize that the worship of the Canaanite gods and goddesses varied from region to region and sometimes even from city to city. Even the exact names of the deities sometimes differed. Due to those differences, it is impossible to make a universal statement and say “Asherah does this, and she is represented by that.” So when archaeologists find a standing stone with a female image or a wooden or clay representation of a woman or goddess, it is hard to say exactly what the representation represents. What is clear is that ritual sex was often involved with the worship of Asherah, and if the Israelites got involved with that it would indeed be a snare to them.

Exd 34:14

**“worship”** A common way of worship was to bow down before the god. Thus, the Hebrew word for this bowing down, *shachah* (#07812 שָׁחָה), was also the word translated as “worship.” Often, “prostration” was to fall to one’s knees and bow the upper body to the earth, and such bowing was an act of worship. In the ancient biblical world, “worship” was not a mental exercise, but was almost always a mental attitude together with some kind of action such as bowing or giving an offering or sacrifice.

[For more on prostration, see Word Study: “Worship.”]

Exd 34:15

**“cut a covenant.”** For more on the phrase “cut a covenant,” see commentary on Gen. 15:18.

**“someone invites you and you eat of his sacrifice.”** Part of the attraction of worshiping pagan gods, or being invited to worship a pagan god, was that often part of the sacrifice was eaten. In the ancient world, meat was not eaten very often, so being invited to a wonderful meal with meat could be a powerful attraction. The foolish unfaithful woman in Proverbs 7 allures her victim with sex and meat to eat that came from her peace offerings and vow that she had offered (Prov. 7:14).

Exd 34:16

**“then they will make your sons prostitute themselves.”** God speaks as if this will absolutely happen, and although some men may be able to resist, some will not. Solomon did not resist the temptation of sex, and Samson also gave in to a woman’s nagging.

Exd 34:17

**“metal gods.”** In this context, this “metal god” would have an immediate reference to the metal calf that the Israelites had recently made. For the translation “metal,” see Exod. 32:4 and 32:8, where “metal” is used.

Exd 34:18

**“You are to keep the Feast of Unleavened Bread.”** We might wonder why the Feast of Unleavened Bread is mentioned first, then rules about sacrifices, then the Sabbath, then the Feast of Weeks (Pentecost), and lastly the Feast of Ingathering (Tabernacles). Rabbi Nahum Sarna asserts it is because the golden calf the Israelites had just made connected that idol to the time of Passover and the Feast of Unleavened Bread, so that feast was mentioned first.[[76]](#footnote-14239) Then Rabbi Cassuto says that the mention of that feast leads to guidance as to laws about firstlings to clarify how God wanted things done in contrast to how the Canaanites did things, because they were known to occasionally sacrifice their firstborn to their gods.[[77]](#footnote-32298)

Exd 34:19

**“All that opens the womb is mine.”** It was understood by the Jews that this referred to the firstborn male child and did not refer to female children. Thus, there were two conditions for the person or animal to be taken by God for His own: it had to be the mother’s firstborn child and it had to be male. If a female child or animal was born first, then the second-born was not given to God, even if it was a male. In modern Judaism, if the firstborn son is born by caesarian section, then the baby boy is not given to God because he did not technically “open the womb.”

[For more on the firstborn males being given to God, see commentary on Exod. 13:2]

**“the firstborn.”** The Hebrew is more literally the one “that opens.” Exodus 34:19 is hard to translate into English due to nouns and verbs that do not come over exactly. The Schocken Bible by Everett Fox has “breacher among oxen and sheep.”

Exd 34:20

**“The firstborn of a donkey.”** This command in Exodus 34:20 about donkeys and firstborn male children was previously stated in Exodus 13:13 (see commentary on Exod. 13:13). Numbers 18:15 further clarifies that this law does not mean just donkeys, which were unclean, but all unclean animals. “Donkeys” are being used here as an example of an unclean animal. Although the Israelites may not have had many unclean animals, they may have had camels, and much later in history, dogs or pigs. Solomon also had apes, although it is questionable whether they were considered “owned” or bred in captivity (1 Kings 10:22; 2 Chron. 9:21).

**“All the firstborn of your sons you must redeem.”** The firstborn that had to be redeemed had to open the womb, i.e., it had to be the mother’s firstborn child (Exod. 13:12, 15), and it had to be a male child (Exod. 13:13; 34:20).

[For more on the redemption of a firstborn child if it was a baby boy, see commentary on Exodus 13:13.]

**“empty-handed.”** The Hebrew text is just “empty,” but in this context, it means without an offering or “empty-handed.” The phrase “No one is to appear before me empty-handed” is an exact quote of what God stated earlier in Exodus 23:15 (see commentary on Exod. 23:15).

Exd 34:21

**“*even* in plowing time and in harvest you must rest.”** Plowing and planting season, and harvest season, are often times of fast-paced work, trying to get the crop planted before the weather changes, or trying to get the harvest in so it isn’t stolen or eaten by animals or otherwise ruined. During those frantic times it can be easy to not take the Sabbath off but keep working to get the work done. But God says even in planting time and harvest time people must observe the Sabbath.

Exd 34:22

**“Feast of Weeks.”** That is the Feast of Pentecost.

**“the firstfruits of the wheat harvest.”** The Feast of Pentecost usually came at the beginning of the wheat harvest. Of course, this differed from year to year, and from location to location in Israel (the harvest in the cool Judean mountains would be later than the harvest in the much hotter Jordan Valley). Nevertheless, Pentecost usually fell toward the start of the wheat harvest. The Feast of Unleavened Bread was almost two months earlier and celebrated the start of the barley harvest.

**“Feast of Ingathering.”** That is, the Feast of Booths, often called the Feast of Booths or the Feast of Tabernacles. Today it is often referred to as “Sukkot” (alternatively spelled “Succoth”).

Exd 34:23

**“Three times in the year all your males are to appear before the face of the Lord.”** The importance of the three pilgrimage feasts is emphasized by the fact that God says several times that every Israelite male was to appear before Him at these three feasts (Exod. 23:14, 17; 34:23-24; Deut. 16:16), (see commentary on Exod. 23:14).

**“Lord Yahweh.”** This is a rare use of names for God because *adon* (“Lord”) is singular here and used without being the honorific plural *adonai*. There are many uses of *adonai Yahweh* in the Bible. This rare use, *adon Yahweh*, is also used in Exodus 23:17. A few English versions (CJB, NLT, Schocken Bible) have “Lord, Yahweh, the God of Israel,” but it is unclear if that is a correct understanding of the text or if “Lord Yahweh” is more correct. English versions that do not use the name Yahweh in their text have a problem with this verse because those versions typically translate both words as “Lord” (although Yahweh is usually translated as “LORD.” Thus, most English versions do not like the translation “Lord LORD,” so they have to come up with a way to translate the phrase. “Sovereign LORD” is a way some versions translate the Hebrew.

**“the God of Israel.”** This phrase here establishes that the covenant relation between Yahweh and Israel is intact. Yahweh is “the God of Israel.”

Exd 34:24

**“enlarge your territory.”** The Hebrew word translated as “territory” is *gevul* (#01366 גְּבוּל, גְּבֻל), and it can refer to “territory” or “border.” The English versions are divided, but in this case, “territory” seems better because a nation can have a larger border without adding much actual territory. For example, the “border” itself can zig-zag and get a lot larger without the territory it encompasses getting larger.

**“No man will covet your land when you go up to appear before Yahweh your God three times in the year.”** This was an important promise God made to the Israelites. God commanded the men to appear before Him at the three pilgrimage feasts held each year: the Feast of Unleavened Bread, the Feast of Harvest (aka, the Feast of Weeks, or Pentecost), and the Feast of Ingathering (aka, the Feast of Booths), (see commentary on Exod. 23:14). This would leave the men’s land and families very vulnerable to all kinds of dangers. But here God says that if the Israelites will obey Him, He will protect their land, and unspoken but understood, also protect their families who live on the land.

Whenever a person went to where God’s Tabernacle or Temple was, it was considered going “up” to that place.

**“appear before.”** The Hebrew text is literally, “see the face of Yahweh.”

Exd 34:25

**“the blood of my sacrifices.”** The word translated as “sacrifices” is singular in the Hebrew text, but it is a collective singular. There were many sacrifices commanded by God.

**“with *anything* leavened.”** Peace offerings and fellowship offerings were to be accompanied by a bread offering, but the bread had to be unleavened bread (Lev. 7:12-13). Leaven (yeast) represented sin, and the bread offering could not have sin associated with it.

Exd 34:26

**“You must not boil a young goat in its mother’s milk”** This occurs three times in the Bible (Exod. 23:19; 34:26; Deut. 14:21; see commentary on Exod. 23:19).

Exd 34:27

**“Write these words.”** God wrote on the stone tablets that Moses carved (Exod. 34:1). Thus, the “these words” that God told Moses to write were not the Ten Commandments, but were part of the covenant that God made with Israel. The commands that God told Moses to write are the commands given by God in Exodus 34:10-26. Those commands were about such things as the Canaanites being driven out of the Promised Land (cf. Deut. 7:1-2; 20:16-18), destroying pagan idols, not making covenants with the people in the land, not making idols, keeping the Sabbath, keeping three feasts every year (Feast of Unleavened Bread, Pentecost, and Feast of Booths), and offering the firstborn of humans and animals to God. Some of these were things God had already said and which had been written in the Book of the Covenant (Exod. 24:7).

**“for in accordance with these words.”** That is, the words of the covenant are in accord with words like the words (the commands) just given by God.

Exd 34:28

**“He was there with Yahweh for 40 days and 40 nights; he did not eat bread or drink water.”** God energized Moses so that he could go without food or water for 40 days and nights. Moses was on Mount Sinai for 40 days and nights the first time he got the tablets (Exod. 24:18) but the text does not say that at that time he went without food or water, although there was likely neither of those on Mount Sinai. Elijah had a somewhat similar experience, going for 40 days and nights on one meal (1 Kings 19:8). Jesus also was in the Judean Wilderness for 40 days and nights, and he did not eat any food, but the text does not say whether or not he had any water (Matt. 4:2).

**“Yahweh wrote on the tablets the words of the covenant.”** The Hebrew is literally “he,” but it refers to Yahweh, as is clear from Exodus 34:1 and Deuteronomy 10:2, 4. Many times in the Hebrew text the person represented by a pronoun changes abruptly. The text assumes that the reader knows that God was the one who wrote on the stone tablets, so it just says “he.”

**“Ten Commandments.”** The Hebrew text is “the ten words,” using “words” like we do for a sentence or message (cf. Deut. 4:13; 10:4).

Exd 34:29

**“when Moses came down from Mount Sinai.”** This was Moses’ seventh and last time down Mount Sinai. He had been up on the mountain with God for 40 days and nights (Exod. 34:28), the second time he had spent 40 days and nights on Mount Sinai (cf. Exod. 24:18). After this seventh time on Mount Sinai, Moses assembled all the material for the Tent of Meeting and had it set up, and it was set up on the first day of the first month in the second year of the wilderness journey, so Israel had been in the wilderness for just short of a year when it was set up (they had left Egypt on the fifteenth day of the first month of the year before).

[For more information on Moses’ seven trips up Mount Sinai, see commentary on Exod. 19:3.]

Exd 34:30

**“the skin of his face was shining.”** Jesus had much the same thing happen at the Transfiguration (Matt. 17:2).

Exd 34:33

**“he put a veil on his face.”** The veil is mentioned in 2 Corinthians 3:13-15.

**Exodus Chapter 35**

Exd 35:1

**“to do.”** The Hebrew is “to do them,” but we would not say that in English.

Exd 35:2

**“a holy *day*.”** The Hebrew is more like “holiness” for you. The word “day” is not in the Hebrew text and “holy” is a noun, not an adjective. But from the context it seems that “holiness” refers to a holy day.”

**“a Sabbath of complete rest.”** The Hebrew is *shabbath shabbathon*, more literally, “a Sabbath of Sabbath observance.” This is to be understood as a Sabbath in which there is Sabbath observance, or a Sabbath of complete rest (cf. “complete rest” CJB, HCSB, NAB, NET, NLT). This Hebrew phrase occurs six times in the Bible: Exodus 31:15, 35:2; Leviticus 16:31; 23:3, 32, and here in Leviticus 25:4.

[For more on the Sabbath, see commentary on Exod. 20:10.]

Exd 35:3

**“You are not to light a fire.”** The people could have a fire, they just were not supposed to light one. That was especially important for people who lived in the hill country where it got really cold during the winter. Furthermore, you could not gather sticks on the Sabbath, so wood had to be close to the fire and ready to burn (Num. 15:32-36). However, if you had the fire going and all the food ready to prepare, you could prepare the food, cook it, and eat it (Exod. 12:16). Some Jews rejected this interpretation of the Scripture and spent the Sabbath day in the dark.[[78]](#footnote-14691)

Exd 35:7

**“rams’ skins dyed red.”** The Hebrew could also mean tanned rams’ skins (see commentary on Exod. 25:5).

**“dugong.”** A mammal quite like a manatee that lives in the Red Sea and Gulf of Aqaba. See commentary on Exodus 25:5.

Exd 35:12

**“atonement-cover.”** Traditionally called the “mercy seat” (see commentary on Exod. 25:17).

Exd 35:13

**“table...Bread of the Presence.”** For information on the table and Bread of the Presence see Exodus 25:23-30 and commentary on Exodus 25:30.

Exd 35:14

**“its *oil* lamps.”** The “lamps” are the seven oil lamps that were placed on the menorah and lit for light (Exod. 25:31-40, esp. v. 37, and Exod. 27:20-21).

Exd 35:16

**“the *bronze* basin and its base.”** This is the large bronze basin that was in the courtyard of the Tabernacle and was used for washing (cf. Exod. 30:18; 38:8).

Exd 35:19

**“holy place.”** In this context, the “holy place” is the entire Tabernacle compound, including the courtyard.

Exd 35:21

**“the Tent of Meeting.”** The “Tabernacle” (“Dwelling Place”) is also referred to as the “Tent of Meeting” because it was the place where people met with God. The Hebrew phrase is *'ohel mo'ed*, in which *'ohel* (#0168 אֹהֶל) means “tent,” and is followed by *mo'ed* (#04150 מוֹעֵד or מֹעֵד), which means a “meeting” or a “place for a meeting.” Thus, the *'ohel mo'ed* is the “Tent of Meeting” (see commentary on Exod. 27:21).

Exd 35:22

**“nose rings.”** The Hebrew is more like “hooks,” but in other contexts this word can refer to nose rings.

**“signet rings.”** A signet ring was a ring that was engraved with special letters and/or characters that identified the owner of the ring.

[For more on signet rings and cylinder seals, see commentary on Gen. 41:42.]

**“waved a wave offering.”** This was done when offering something in a celebratory manner.[[79]](#footnote-31580)

Exd 35:23

**“rams’ skins dyed red.”** The Hebrew could also mean tanned rams’ skins (see commentary on Exod. 25:5).

**“dugong.”** A mammal quite like a manatee that lives in the Red Sea and Gulf of Aqaba (see commentary on Exodus 25:5).

Exd 35:25

**“skillful.”** The Hebrew is an idiom: “wise of heart,” which means “skillful.”

Exd 35:26

**“skillfully.”** The Hebrew is an idiom: “with wisdom.”

Exd 35:28

**“spices.”** The Hebrew word is singular, but it is a collective singular, and thus “spices” in English.

**“and for the fragrant incense.”** There is no mention of oil being in the sacred incense (Exod. 30:34-38), so this seems to look back to the word “spices” that the leaders brought (see the wording of Exodus 25:6).

Exd 35:30

**“called by name Bezalel.”** (Cf. Exod. 31:2-3)

Exd 35:31

**“wisdom.”** This can imply “skill.”

Exd 35:35

**“skill.”** The Hebrew is an idiom: “wisdom of heart,” which in this context refers to skill.

**Exodus Chapter 36**

Exd 36:1

**“skillful.”** The Hebrew is an idiom: “wise-hearted.”

Exd 36:2

**“skillful.”** The Hebrew is an idiom, literally “wise of heart.”

**“to come to do the work.”** The Hebrew is more choppy: “to come to the work to do it,” but the phrase means “to come to do the work.”

Exd 36:3

**“every morning.”** The Hebrew is more literally “in the morning in the morning,” meaning every morning.

Exd 36:8

**“finely twisted linen.”** For more on the curtain and finely twisted linen, see commentary on Exodus 26:1.

Exd 36:14

**“as a tent.”** The Tabernacle had a sloped roof just like every other tent in the biblical culture (see commentary on Exod. 40:19).

Exd 36:19

**“for the tent.”** The Tabernacle had a sloped roof just like every other tent in the biblical culture, so the Tabernacle roof was referred to as a “tent” (see commentary on Exod. 40:19).

**“rams’ skins dyed red.”** The Hebrew could also mean tanned rams’ skins (see commentary on Exod. 25:5).

**“dugong.”** A mammal quite like a manatee that lives in the Red Sea and Gulf of Aqaba. See commentary on Exodus 25:5.

Exd 36:27

**“west *side*.”** The Hebrew is literally, “toward the sea,” i.e., the Mediterranean Sea.

Exd 36:33

**“from end to end.”** That is, from end to end of the Tabernacle.

Exd 36:35

**“veil.”** This was the veil that separated the Holy Place from the Holy of Holies. It is never called a “curtain” even though that was its purpose, but is referred to by the Hebrew word *porekhet* (#06532 פֹּרֶכֶת), which is translated as “veil” (see commentary on Exod. 26:1).

**“finely twisted linen.”** For more on the curtain and finely twisted linen, see commentary on Exodus 26:1.

Exd 36:36

**“He made four pillars of acacia for it.”** The four pillars held up the veil.

Exd 36:37

**“screen.”** The only entrance to the Tabernacle courtyard was on the east side, and the only entrance to the Tabernacle itself was on the east side and both those entrances had “screens” that kept people from seeing inside. The Hebrew word translated as “screen” is *masakh* (#04539 מָסָךְ), and one screen, the outer one at the entrance to the Tabernacle courtyard, separated the courtyard from the outside world (Exod. 27:16), while the inner screen separated the Tabernacle from the Tabernacle courtyard (Exod. 26:36-37).

[For more on the Tabernacle coverings and curtains, see commentary on Exod. 26:1.]

Exd 36:38

**“He overlaid their tops and their bands with gold.”** The tops (capitals) and bands were not mentioned in the pattern of the Tabernacle in Exodus 26:37, but the Exodus verse mentions “hooks” that hold the screen up, which are not mentioned in Exodus 36:38. The word translated as “tops” is literally “heads.”

**Exodus Chapter 37**

Exd 37:1

**“Bezalel made the ark.”** The ark of the covenant is first described in Exodus 25:10-16.

Exd 37:3

**“two rings on its one side and two rings on its other side.”** The ark was a rectangular box, with a long side and a short side. Although the Bible does not say on which of the sides the poles for carrying it went, it would have had to have been the long side such that the poles went north-south, pointing from side to side in the Tabernacle, not from front to back. That way the High Priest could approach the ark easily without tripping over the poles.

Exd 37:6

**“atonement-cover.”** The atonement-cover is first described in Exodus 25:17-22, and it is traditionally referred to as the “mercy seat” (see commentary on Exod. 25:17). The atonement-cover was made of pure gold, not of acacia wood covered in gold.

Exd 37:8

**“He made the cherubim at its two ends *of one piece* from the atonement-cover.”** The cherubim were not made separately and then attached to the atonement-cover, but were made such that the atonement-cover and the cherubim were of one piece of solid gold.

Exd 37:9

**“facing one another, and their faces were *looking* toward the atonement-cover.”** The cherubim were positioned on the atonement-cover such that their heads were toward each other, but their faces were looking down at the atonement-cover, as if in recognition of the importance of the forgiveness of sin.

Exd 37:10

**“table.”** This is the table for the Bread of the Presence” (see Exod. 25:23-30).

Exd 37:12

**“He made a rim of a handbreadth around it.”** There was a rim around the table for the Bread of the Presence to keep it from being inadvertently knocked off the table; this rim is also described in Exodus 25:25.

Exd 37:17

**“And he made the menorah.”** The menorah is also described in Exodus 25:31-40.

**“of pure gold.”** Most things in the Tabernacle were made of acacia wood covered in gold, for example, the ark (Exod. 37:1-2), the table (Exod. 37:10-11), and the golden altar of incense (Exod. 37:25-26). But the atonement-cover over the ark of the covenant and the menorah were both made of pure gold.

Exd 37:18

**“There were six branches going out of its sides.”** The shaft of the menorah and each of its six branches held an oil lamp to give light to the Holy Place, so the Tabernacle menorah was a seven-light menorah.

Exd 37:23

**“seven lamps.”** The menorah in the Tabernacle was a seven-lamp menorah. Its seven oil lamps were placed on the menorah and lit at night to give light in the Tabernacle. The menorah is first described when God gave the plan to Moses (Exod. 25:31-40).

**“firepans.”** See commentary on Leviticus 10:1.

Exd 37:24

**“a talent of pure gold.”** A “talent” was a measure of weight, and it varied, usually with the empire. For example, the Israelite, Babylonian, and Roman talents were all different. The Israelite talent was approximately 75 pounds (34 kg).

Exd 37:25

**“He made the altar of incense of acacia wood.”** The golden altar of incense is first described in Exodus 30:1-10.

**“Its horns were of one piece with it.”** The horns on the altar were not made separately and then attached to the altar, the altar and horns were made as one piece.

Exd 37:29

**“the pure incense of fragrant spices.”** This incense is the special incense that was burned on the golden altar of incense, which was in the outer room of the Tabernacle, the Holy Place (Exod. 30:1-10; 37:25-29). What this special incense was made of is described in Exodus 30:34-38.

**Exodus Chapter 38**

Exd 38:1

**“He made the altar of burnt offering from acacia wood.”** The altar of burnt offering is also described in Exodus 27:1-8.

Exd 38:3

**“firepans.”** These firepans were for the altar, so they are made of bronze. See commentary on Leviticus 10:1.

Exd 38:8

**“He made the basin of bronze and its base of bronze out of the mirrors.”** This bronze basin is described more fully in Exodus 30:17-21.

The glass mirror that we use today was not invented for many centuries after this event (the first archaeological evidence of a glass mirror was in the third century AD). In biblical times and right up into the Roman Empire, mirrors were made of bronze. The bronze was highly polished so that people could see a kind of reflection of themselves, but it was not a very good reflection. This is why 1 Corinthians 13:12 says that people see in a mirror, but “darkly.” The image in a bronze mirror was both dark and indistinct.

**“the serving women who served.”** This is the way the Hebrew text reads, although it seems awkward in English, and some translations simplify it and just say, “the women who served.” But some versions read “serving women who served” (cf. ERV, LSV, NASB. Also see ASV, ESV, RSV), and the REV does as well. The word translated as “serve” is not the usual word for “serve,” and so it merits some attention. The NET text note reads, “The word for ‘serve’ is not the ordinary one. It means ‘to serve in a host’ [army], especially in a war. It appears that women were organized into bands and served at the tent of meeting.” That would make sense. Many women want to serve God, and there was a lot to do to maintain the Tabernacle service. The women would have had to have been organized. It seems that the two sons of Eli the priest were taking advantage of these women and having sex with them (1 Sam. 2:22). Sadly, this practice does not seem to be uncommon in church history.

**“the Tent of Meeting.”** The “Tabernacle” (“Dwelling Place”) is also referred to as the “Tent of Meeting” because it was the place where people met with God. The Hebrew phrase is *'ohel mo'ed*, in which *'ohel* (#0168 אֹהֶל) means “tent,” and is followed by *mo'ed* (#04150 מוֹעֵד or מֹעֵד), which means a “meeting” or a “place for a meeting.” Thus, the *'ohel mo'ed* is the “Tent of Meeting” (see commentary on Exod. 27:21).

Exd 38:9

**“hangings.”** The Hebrew text uses the word *qela* (#07050 קֶלַע), which is generally translated as “hangings.” When it comes to the Tabernacle, the Bible usually used different words for the different parts of the Tabernacle, just like the word *qela* is used for the “hangings,” the outer cloth wall of the Tabernacle courtyard (see commentary on Exod. 26:1).

Exd 38:14

**“hangings for the one side *of the gate*.”** The “gate” was the 20-cubit “screen” of beautiful material of blue, purple, and scarlet. It had 15-cubit white walls on each side—each “shoulder”—of it (see commentary on Exod. 27:14).

Exd 38:15

**“On this side.”** The Hebrew translated as “side” is literally, “shoulder,” (cf. Exod. 27:14-15, which uses “shoulder” also, see commentary on Exod. 27:14).

Exd 38:16

**“hangings.”** The hangings made the outer cloth wall around the Tabernacle courtyard (see commentary on Exod. 26:1).

Exd 38:18

**“The screen for the gate of the courtyard.”** The Hebrew word translated as “screen” is *masakh* (#04539 מָסָךְ), and there were two “screens” used as gates in the Tabernacle. One as the gate between the outside world and the Tabernacle courtyard, and one between the courtyard and the Tabernacle itself (see commentary on Exod. 26:1).

**“finely twisted linen of blue, purple, *and* scarlet.”** Although the curtains surrounding the courtyard of the Tabernacle were made of just fine linen, whose natural color would have been white, the entrance to the Tabernacle courtyard was made of the same material as the Tabernacle itself, linen with blue, purple, and scarlet threads, so it would have really been beautiful and stood out from the rest of the curtains of the courtyard. It would not have been difficult to spot the entrance of the courtyard of the Tabernacle.

[For more on the finely twisted linen cloth, see commentary on Exod. 26:1.]

**“the hangings of the courtyard.”** These are the cloth walls of the Tabernacle courtyard (see commentary on Exod. 26:1).

Exd 38:19

**“pillars.”** That is, the pillars associated with the different panels that were fastened together and made up the screen that was the gate to the Tabernacle courtyard from the outside world.

Exd 38:20

**“All the tent pegs.”** The Tabernacle was a big tent, and like any tent, it was held up by tent pegs and ropes, and the courtyard cloth walls were also held up by tent pegs and ropes.

Exd 38:21

**“under the direction of Ithamar.”** The Hebrew is an idiom, “under the hand of Ithamar.”

Exd 38:25

**“1,775 shekels.”** That is roughly 44 pounds (20 kg). A shekel was roughly .4 ounces (11 or 11.5 grams). See commentary on Genesis 24:22, “shekel.”

Exd 38:26

**“a beka a head.”** The Hebrew is more literally, “a beka a skull.” Sometimes in Hebrew the word “skull” was used when counting people, much like we in English say “a head count.” The place of the head count at the time of Christ is part of the evidence that Jesus was crucified on the Mount of Olives (see commentary on Matt. 27:33, point #6).

**“the shekel of the holy place.”** That is, the shekel of the Tabernacle, sometimes called the shekel of the sanctuary.

**“who crossed over to those who were counted.”** That is, to those men who crossed over from the group of men who had not been counted to the group that had been counted.

Exd 38:27

**“The 100 talents of silver were for casting the bases of the holy *Tabernacle* and the bases of the veil.”** Although the bases for the courtyard curtain were made of bronze, the bases for the Tabernacle itself, the boards that gave it strength and stability, were made of silver (Exod. 26:21). In this context, the “veil” was the veil that separated the Holy Place from the Holy of Holies. The bases of the pillars that held it up were made of silver (Exod. 26:32).

**“a talent for each base.”** The bases for the boards of the Tabernacle and the pillars of the Tabernacle courtyard weighed a talent each, or roughly 75 pounds (34 kg). So between the 75-pound bases and the tent pegs and ropes that held the Tabernacle and the courtyard curtains in place, it would have taken an incredibly strong wind to blow it over.

Exd 38:29

**“70 talents.”** Seventy talents is roughly 5,250 pounds (2,381 kg), so adding the talents and the shekels made the weight over 2.5 tons of silver.

[For more on the talent weight, see commentary on Exod. 25:39.]

**“2,400 shekels.”** That is roughly 60 pounds (27 kg). A shekel was roughly .4 ounces (11 or 11.5 grams). See commentary on Genesis 24:22, “shekel.”

Exd 38:31

**“the tent pegs...the pegs.”** The Tabernacle and the courtyard curtain had to be strongly supported by tent pegs and rope just like any tent or cloth structure in the desert. The desert winds could be quite strong at times, so these pegs had to be quite large and sturdy, and the fact that they were made of bronze helped their strength.

**Exodus Chapter 39**

Exd 39:1

**“serving in the holy place.”** In this context, the “holy place” seems to refer to the entire Tabernacle: the courtyard and the Tabernacle itself.

Exd 39:2

**“ephod.”** In this context, it seems the ephod was a kind of smock that was worn by the High Priest (see commentary on Exod. 28:6)

**“gold, blue, purple, scarlet, and fine twisted linen.”** The High Priest’s garments were interwoven with gold, which set him apart from the other garments that had the same blue, purple, and scarlet yarn (see commentary on Exod. 28:5).

[For more on this cloth, see commentary on Exodus 26:1.]

**“purple.”** Purple dye was rare and very expensive (see commentary on 2 Chron. 3:14).

Exd 39:4

**“corners.”** See commentary on Exodus 28:7.

Exd 39:5

**“the ephod.”** The Hebrew text reads “it,” but “the ephod” was supplied in the translation for clarity.

Exd 39:6

**“the sons of Israel.”** That is, the 12 sons of Jacob.

Exd 39:8

**“of gold, of blue, purple, scarlet, and fine twined linen.”** The High Priest’s garments, including his breastplate, were interwoven with gold, which set him apart (see commentary on Exod. 28:5).

Exd 39:9

**“They made the breastplate *folded* double.”** The breastplate was folded double into a pouch that was roughly nine inches (23 cm) square. Into the pouch were put the Urim and Thummim that the High Priest used to get the judgment of God, so the breastplate was sometimes referred to as the breastplate of judgment (Exod. 28:15, 29, 30).

[For more on the Urim and Thummim see commentary on Exod. 28:30.]

Exd 39:11

**“lapis lazuli.”** The deep blue color of lapis lazuli—a stone that was well-known in the ancient Near East—was often associated with God and his throne (Exod. 24:10; Job. 28:16; Isa. 54:11; Ezek. 1:26; 10:1). The majority English translation, “sapphire,” is almost certainly wrong (see commentary on Ezek. 1:26).

Exd 39:14

**“like the engravings of a seal.”** The “seal” would be a signet ring, cylinder seal, or scarab seal. These were usually made of stone and had a name or title engraved on them. These were very common in the ancient world and identified the owner. The stones on the breastplate of the High Priest were to have the names of the tribes of Israel engraved on them.

[For more on seals and signets, see commentary on Gen. 41:42.]

Exd 39:23

**“The opening of the robe in its middle.”** The hole in the middle of the robe was the neck hole (cf. Exod. 28:32).

Exd 39:28

**“caps.”** These “caps” were “a band of linen wrapped around the head, forming something like a brimless convex cap” (see commentary on Exod. 28:40).

Exd 39:30

**“the holy crown medallion of pure gold.”** This medallion is mentioned in Exodus 29:6.

Exd 39:34

**“rams’ skins dyed red.”** The Hebrew could also mean tanned rams’ skins (see commentary on Exod. 25:5).

It is noteworthy here that there are only two of the four Tabernacle coverings mentioned, and both notably pictured the Messiah (see commentary on Exod. 26:1).

**“dugong.”** A mammal quite like a manatee that lives in the Red Sea and Gulf of Aqaba. See commentary on Exodus 25:5.

**“the veil as the screen.”** This was the veil that was to be hung between the Holy Place and the Holy of Holies.

Exd 39:35

**“atonement-cover.”** Traditionally called the “mercy seat” (see commentary on Exod. 25:17). Note that the atonement-cover was a separate piece from the ark of the covenant, and that is true in other places as well.

Exd 39:36

**“the table.”** That is, the table on which the Bread of the Presence was placed (see Exod. 25:23-30).

**“the Bread of the Presence.”** The Bread of the Presence was large cakes of bread that were in the Tabernacle and Temple (see commentary on Exod. 25:30).

Exd 39:38

**“the screen for the entrance of the Tent.”** This is the screen at the entrance of the Holy Place of the Tabernacle, and the Levites had to pass through this outer curtain to enter the Holy Place to tend the lamps of the menorah and do the other duties inside the Tabernacle. The curtain screened the Holy Place so that the inside of the Tabernacle could not be seen from the courtyard. The screen that was between the Tabernacle courtyard and the outside world is mentioned in Exodus 39:40. So there were three curtains, or screens, that kept people from seeing further than that screen. These three were: the outermost curtain or screen that was between the outside world and the Tabernacle courtyard, the curtain at the entrance of the Tabernacle between the courtyard and the Holy Place, and the curtain that was between the Holy Place and the Holy of Holies.

[For more on the two screens, see commentary on Exod. 26:1.]

Exd 39:39

**“the bronze basin and its base.”** This is the large bronze basin that was in the courtyard of the Tabernacle and was used for washing (cf. Exod. 30:18; 38:8).

Exd 39:40

**“the hangings.”** These are the cloth walls of the Tabernacle courtyard (see commentary on Exod. 26:1).

**“the screen for the gate of the courtyard.”** The screen between the “outside world” and the courtyard of the Tabernacle was on the east side of the courtyard and was the way to enter into the courtyard from the outside. Exactly how to get through or around the screen is not given in Scripture. For more on the screen, see commentary on Exodus 26:1.

**“the Tent of Meeting.”** The “Tabernacle” (“Dwelling Place”) is also referred to as the “Tent of Meeting” because it was the place where people met with God. The Hebrew phrase is *'ohel mo'ed*, in which *'ohel* (#0168 אֹהֶל) means “tent,” and is followed by *mo'ed* (#04150 מוֹעֵד or מֹעֵד), which means a “meeting” or a “place for a meeting.” Thus, the *'ohel mo'ed* is the “Tent of Meeting” (see commentary on Exod. 27:21).

Exd 39:41

**“the holy place.”** In this context, the noun “holy,” translated here in Exodus 39:41 as “holy *place*,” referred to the Tabernacle and its surrounding courtyard, because the priests served in different ways in the courtyard and in the Tabernacle itself.

**Exodus Chapter 40**

Exd 40:2

**“On the first day of the first month.”** This is the first day of the first month of the second year of Israel’s wilderness wanderings (Exod. 40:17). Israel left Egypt on the 15th day of the first month of the first year (Exod. 12:29), so Israel had been wandering in the wilderness for almost a full lunar year at this time, likely 339 days (a lunar year is usually 354 days). The Hebrew is more literally, “On a day of the first month, the first of the month,” but that is awkward, so most English versions smooth out the Hebrew to read more easily in English.

[For the timing from the Exodus to the census in Numbers 1:2, including the setting up of the Tabernacle, the events of Leviticus, and the start of the census in the Book of Numbers, see commentary on Num. 1:1.]

**“the Tent of Meeting.”** The “Tabernacle” (“Dwelling Place”) is also referred to as the “Tent of Meeting” because it was the place where people met with God. The Hebrew phrase is *'ohel mo'ed*, in which *'ohel* (#0168 אֹהֶל) means “tent,” and is followed by *mo'ed* (#04150 מוֹעֵד or מֹעֵד), which means a “meeting” or a “place for a meeting.” Thus, the *'ohel mo'ed* is the “Tent of Meeting” (see commentary on Exod. 27:21).

Before the Tabernacle was set up, Moses set up a tent he referred to as “the Tent of Meeting.” He met with Yahweh at this special tent until the Tabernacle was set up (see commentary on Exod. 33:7).

Exd 40:3

**“You are to put the ark of the testimony in it.”** When Moses sets up the Tabernacle, the first thing he does is to put the ark of the covenant in it and then shield the ark from prying eyes with a veil. Then he puts the furniture in the Holy Place, the outer room of the Tabernacle: the table for the Bread of the Presence, the menorah, and the golden altar of incense (Exod. 40:4-5). Then he puts the screen up at the entrance to the courtyard of the Tabernacle so people cannot see inside (although they can until the “walls” of the Tabernacle courtyard, the hangings, are set up) and he sets up the great altar of sacrifice and the bronze basin for washing (Exod. 40:6-7).

**“shield the ark with the veil.”** This veil is the screen between the outer room of the Tabernacle, the Holy Place, and the inner room, the Holy of Holies. The idea of the veil is that it was to separate the Holy of Holies from the Holy Place, and English versions differ but get the general idea using words that include “shield,” “hide,” “conceal,” “cover,” and “screen off.”

Exd 40:4

**“the table.”** That is, the table on which the Bread of the Presence was placed.

**“arrange the *bread* that is on it.”** What is on the table are the 12 loaves of the Bread of the Presence. The bread was to be in two stacks of six loaves each.

**“set its lamps on it.”** This is similar to Exodus 25:37 (see commentary on Exod. 25:37). Many versions read “set” or something similar instead of “light” (cf. CEB, CSB, ESV, LSB, NAB, NASB, NET, NJB, NIV, NLT, NRSV, RSV).

Exd 40:5

**“set the golden altar of incense before the ark of the testimony.”** To someone unfamiliar with the set up of the Tabernacle, it could seem that the golden altar was in the Holy of Holies with the ark of the covenant, but it is in the outer room, the Holy Place, east of (in front of) the veil that separated the Holy Place from the Holy of Holies. The close proximity of the altar of incense to the ark, and their intimate connection—the smoke from the altar covered the ark of the covenant when the High Priest went into the Holy of Holies on the Day of Atonement—could explain why Hebrews 9:4 connects the altar of incense with the Holy of Holies (see Exod. 30:6 and Heb. 9:4).

**“Then put up the screen for the entrance to the tabernacle.”** This is the curtain that was the entrance to the first room of the Tabernacle, the Holy Place, and it divided the Holy Place inside from the courtyard outside.

[For more information on the screens in the Tabernacle, see commentary on Exod. 26:1.]

Exd 40:6

**“the altar of burnt offering.”** This is the great bronze altar in the courtyard of the Tabernacle upon which sacrifices were burned to ash.

Exd 40:7

**“the *bronze* basin.”** This is the large bronze basin that was in the courtyard of the Tabernacle and was used for washing (cf. Exod. 30:18; 38:8).

Exd 40:8

**“The the screen of the gate of the courtyard.”** The screen of the gate of the courtyard was the beautifully woven curtain that was the entrance to the courtyard of the Tabernacle from the outside world (see commentary on Exod. 26:1).

Exd 40:9

**“all its accessories.”** The Tabernacle and its furniture—the golden altar of incense, the menorah, and the table of the Bread of the Presence—had many accessories that enabled the Tabernacle to perform all its functions.

Exd 40:10

**“most holy.”** Rabbi Umberto Cassuto comments on why the altar of burnt offering is referred to as “most holy”: “the point is specifically stated so that none should think that since its place was outside the Tabernacle, its sanctity was of a lower order.”[[80]](#footnote-20945)

Exd 40:15

**“for an everlasting priesthood throughout their generations.”** Being a priest or Levite was passed from father to son, and being a priest or Levite was a matter of genealogy, being born one. There was no way to be a priest or Levite if you were not born one.

Exd 40:17

**“And in the first month in the second year, on the first day of the month.”** The Israelites left Egypt on the fifteenth day of the first month of the year, and according to Exodus 40:17, the Tabernacle was set up on the first day of the first month of the second year, so Israel had been out of Egypt for just short of a full year—14 or 15 days short, depending on the moon—when the Tabernacle was set up.

[For the timing from the Exodus to the census in Numbers 1:2, including the setting up of the Tabernacle, the events of Leviticus, and the start of the census in the Book of Numbers, see commentary on Num. 1:1.]

Exd 40:19

**“He spread the tent over the tabernacle.”** In this context, the “tabernacle” is the main body of the tabernacle that included the wall-boards, while the “tent” most likely referred to the two inner curtains—the inner layer of finely twined linen and the second layer of woven goat hair—that were over the top of the Tabernacle. Then the “covering” on top was the two outer layers of the Tabernacle roof, the rams’ skin dyed red and the dugong skin (cf. Exod. 26:1-14). That would fit with Exod. 26:14.

It is possible, however, that the “tent” just referred to the second layer of the roof, the woven goat hair covering, since tents in that culture were made of black goat hair (Bedouin tents were made of goat hair). Then the covering on top of the tent would be the ram’s skin dyed red and the outermost covering of the dugong skin.

It is worth noting that the roof of the Tabernacle is referred to as a “tent.” Although it is very common to see illustrations of the Tabernacle with a flat roof, that would not be functional in the climate of Israel, which had a rainy season and also occasional snow in the higher elevations such as at Jerusalem.

The Bible calls the Tabernacle a “tent.” In biblical times, tents had sloped roofs—the top of the tent was sloped. That shape allowed rain and snow to drain off so the tent would not leak in rainy or snowy weather. The Tabernacle was a “tent” (Exod. 26:7, 14; 36:14, 19; 40:19), and thus it would have had a sloped roof. The Tabernacle is also referred to as the “Tent of Meeting” (Exod. 39:40; Lev. 16:16; Num. 2:2), and the “Tent of the Testimony” (Num. 9:15). Although many scholars today believe the top of the Tabernacle was flat, the evidence of Scripture and logic goes against that. James Strong, the author of the well-known Strong’s Concordance, writes:

“As to the roof [of the Tabernacle], the first question that necessarily arises is, did the edifice have a peak or was it flat-roofed? This is definitely settled by the single word *tent*, which is distinctly applied to the upper portion of the structure, erected ‘upon’ the Tabernacle walls (Exod. 40:19), and which by no possibility of usage, in any language, can mean anything but a canvas covering with a peak. The necessity of shedding rain, and the invariable style of Bedouin encampments, moreover fix this as an incontrovertible principle of architecture in such cases. … nearly all the proposed plans of the Tabernacle, being on the flat roof principle, fail to make any adequate provision for securing either side of curtains, or indeed for disposing of them at all.”[[81]](#footnote-19977) “...a flat roof would have become moldy and rotten irretrievably in the first month of winter…. A flat canvas roof, however tightly stretched, must have sagged so as to catch tons of water, if impervious; breaking the canvas and indeed causing a whole structure to collapse. Or if, as is more probable, the rain would penetrate the canvas bowl, it would deluge the apartments, especially the Most Holy place, where no one was allowed to enter, even for the purpose of lifting the roof with a rod in order to allow the water to run off. In every point of view, the flat roof scheme is utterly impractical.” [[82]](#footnote-16489). Note that Strong calls the roof “canvas,” using the term in a general way to refer to roofing material. He was well aware that the materials composing the four layers of the roof over the Tabernacle were not “canvas” in the modern sense of the word.

Roy Lee DeWitt also realized the roof of the Tabernacle was sloped, and writes: “The goat-hair covering is the only covering with specific information about its placement over the tabernacle. ...The covering hung one cubit [twenty-five inches] over each side of the tabernacle [Exod. 26:13]. Considering this information, it would be impossible for the Tabernacle to have a flat roof as many have surmised. Instead of the covering hanging well over the sides, it must've been held up by the nine pillars of the tabernacle to meet the biblical requirements and thus form a raised or peaked roof. ... two sets of pillars were used in the tabernacle each with its own veil [Exod. 26:31-37; 36:35-38]. ... because no height is given for any of the pillars, many have assumed that the roof of the tabernacle was flat and flush with the walls. This is not a correct conclusion. Because the goat hair covering was to hang exactly one cubit (25 inches) over the sides of the walls. It is necessary for the pillars to extend above the walls to take up the slack of the goat hair covering. This necessitates a roof higher than the sides of the tabernacle.”[[83]](#footnote-32335)

As DeWitt points out, no height is given for the pillars that created the actual height of the Tabernacle. It is interesting that when the Bible describes Solomon’s Temple, many dimensions are given, but not the height of that building either. If the Bible had given the height of the Tabernacle, it would have been easy to see that the roof was peaked. However, as James Strong pointed out, the fact that the Bible refers to the roof of the Tabernacle as a “tent” should be enough evidence in and of itself to show that the Tabernacle roof was sloped just like every other tent in that culture was.

Exd 40:20

**“the testimony.”** The tablets of the Ten Commandments are here called “the testimony” because they testify to the covenant that God made with Israel, which included the laws that Israel agreed to obey (Exod. 24:3-8).

**“atonement-cover.”** Traditionally called the “mercy seat” (see commentary on Exod. 25:17). Here we see that the “atonement-cover” was a separate piece from the ark.

Exd 40:21

**“veil as a screen.”** The Hebrew is a noun construct, more literally “veil screen,” and it could be translated as “veil as a screen” or “screening veil.” The point is the veil is a screen.

**“and shielded the ark of the testimony.”** The curtain between the Holy Place, the outer room of the Tabernacle, and the Holy of Holies, the inner room, screened the ark of the covenant from being seen. Only the High Priest could go in the Holy of Holies, and even he could only go in on the Day of Atonement, and on that day he would go in two times (Lev. 16:1-28). This screening and limited entry showed and protected the holiness of the Holy of Holies and the presence of God.

Exd 40:22

**“on the north side of the Tabernacle.”** The Tabernacle faced east, so the north side was the side on the right as you entered the Tabernacle from the courtyard. The table and the Bread of the Presence were on the north side of the Holy Place, and the menorah was on the left side, the south side.

**“outside of the veil.”** That is, on the east side of the veil that separated the Holy Place from the Holy of Holies. The Table of the Bread of the Presence, the menorah, and the golden altar of incense were all in the Holy Place of the Tabernacle, the outer room of the Tabernacle.

Exd 40:24

**“on the south side of the tabernacle.”** The Tabernacle always faced east, so the south side was always the left side as you were walking into the Tabernacle.

Exd 40:25

**“and he set the lamps *on it*.”** This is a summary statement to show that Aaron did “as Yahweh commanded Moses.” Aaron set the oil lamps on the menorah, then later the lamps were lit in the evening. Setting the lamps on the menorah is also in Exodus 25:37 and Exodus 40:4 (but see commentary on Exod. 25:37).

Exd 40:26

**“in front of the veil.”** The golden altar was in the Holy Place in front of the veil that was between the Holy Place and the Holy of Holies, where the ark of the covenant was. The golden altar of incense was close to the Holy of Holies and was associated with it, which explains the point that Hebrews 9:4 is making.

Exd 40:27

**“burned.”** See commentary on Exodus 29:13. This is making the point that Moses and Aaron did what Yahweh commanded, and this is more of a summary statement—Aaron did not burn the incense right then and there, but later, at the time Yahweh had commanded.

Exd 40:28

**“entrance-screen for the tabernacle.”** This entrance-screen separated the Tabernacle—the outer room, the Holy Place—from the courtyard of the Tabernacle. The Hebrew is a noun construct and so the translation “entrance-screen” is quite accurate.

[For more on the “screen” that separated the courtyard of the Tabernacle from the Tabernacle itself, see commentary on Exod. 26:1.]

Exd 40:29

**“He set the altar of burnt offering at the entrance of the tabernacle.”** The altar of burnt offering was set between the entrance to the Tabernacle courtyard and the Tabernacle itself, but enough in the middle so that neither the courtyard curtains nor the tent cloth of the Tabernacle were caught on fire by sparks. Then, between the altar and the Tabernacle was the bronze laver for washing, and it was likely off to the side a little so that priests did not have to walk around it or the priests who might have been using it in order to get from the altar to the Tabernacle.

Exd 40:30

**“the *bronze* basin.”** This is the large bronze basin that was in the courtyard of the Tabernacle and was used for washing (cf. Exod. 30:18; 38:8).

Exd 40:31

**“washed their hands and their feet from it.”** Moses, Aaron, and the priests took water from the bronze basin and washed with that water that was “from it.” The priests did not wash “in” the basin, but with water “from” the basin (cf. Exod. 30:19).

Exd 40:33

**“gate-screen.”** The Hebrew has the two nouns, gate and screen in construct, so the translation “gate-screen” is quite accurate. The gate-screen separated the outside world from the Tabernacle courtyard.

**“So Moses finished the work.”** Since the last chronological marker was in Exodus 40:17, that the Tabernacle was set up “in the first month in the second year, on the first day of the month,” we can assume that was the day the work was finished.

Exd 40:34

**“Then the cloud covered the Tent of Meeting.”** When the Tabernacle was completed (Exod. 40:17, 33), the pillar of cloud that had been going before Israel moved to over the Tabernacle. Occasionally, paintings of the Tabernacle show the pillar of cloud over it.

**“and the glory of Yahweh filled the tabernacle.”** The “glory of Yahweh” was the bright cloud of light, sometimes called the “shekinah” or “shekinah glory” that surrounded God and veiled His presence so that people could not see Him directly. The glory of God was so bright that Moses could not be in the Tabernacle when God’s glory was shining (Exod. 40:35). The “glory of Yahweh” was not separate from Yahweh Himself. The glory was the bright cloud around Yahweh. So Yahweh Himself came into the Tabernacle.

[For more information about the “glory of Yahweh” and the bright cloud that surrounds God, see commentary on Ezek. 1:28.]

Exd 40:35

**“settled on it.”** The Hebrew word carries the idea of settling somewhere; “dwelt,” “settled,” or “rested.” The cloud came and settled on the Tabernacle, but it moved soon (see Exod. 40:36).

Exd 40:36

**“When the cloud was taken up from over the tabernacle, the children of Israel would set out on all their journeys.”** This is further described in Numbers 9:15-23. The Hebrew word translated as “set out” is the same root as “journeys.”

Exd 40:38

**“in the cloud by night.”** The Hebrew does not have “the cloud” but has “it,” but “the cloud” is added to the text for clarity.

1. Thomas J. White, Exodus, Brazos Theological Commentary on the Bible, Kindle edition, 26-27. [↑](#footnote-ref-25468)
2. Keil and Delitzsch, Commentary on the Old Testament, 1:421; Lange’s Commentary on the Holy Scriptures. [↑](#footnote-ref-15435)
3. George Bush, Commentary on Exodus. [↑](#footnote-ref-11081)
4. M. Kalisch, A Historical and Critical Commentary on The Old Testament, 22. [↑](#footnote-ref-32467)
5. Everett Fox, The Schocken Bible: The Five Books of Moses, 264. Cf. Wikipedia, “Moses,” note 43, accessed October 3,2024, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Moses. [↑](#footnote-ref-32458)
6. Horatio B. Hackett, Illustrations of Scripture, chap. 1, para. “Pastures of the Desert,” Kindle. [↑](#footnote-ref-15156)
7. C.S. Lewis, The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe. [↑](#footnote-ref-11876)
8. Frederick Field, Origen Hexapla, 1:85. [↑](#footnote-ref-22357)
9. B. Grossfeld, translator, Aramaic Bible Vol. 7: Targum Onkelos to Exodus. [↑](#footnote-ref-13507)
10. William Propp, Exodus 1-18 [AB], 181. [↑](#footnote-ref-25099)
11. Cf. Keil &amp; Delitzsch, Commentary on the Old Testament: The Pentateuch, 460. [↑](#footnote-ref-29137)
12. Nahum Sarna, The JPS Torah Commentary: Exodus, 31. [↑](#footnote-ref-12960)
13. Nahum Sarna, The JPS Torah Commentary: Exodus, 5. [↑](#footnote-ref-12878)
14. George Bush, Commentary on Exodus, 86. [↑](#footnote-ref-32734)
15. Nahum Sarna, The JPS Torah Commentary: Exodus, 42. [↑](#footnote-ref-23537)
16. Robert Alter, The Hebrew Bible: The Five Books of Moses, 1:245. [↑](#footnote-ref-21860)
17. George Bush, Commentary on Exodus, 110. [↑](#footnote-ref-12644)
18. Nahum Sarna, The JPS Torah Commentary: Exodus, 44. [↑](#footnote-ref-29975)
19. George Bush, Commentary on Exodus, p. 123-124 [↑](#footnote-ref-19614)
20. Cf. HALOT, Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon. [↑](#footnote-ref-26094)
21. Joseph Thayer, Thayer’s Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament, 471, Strong’s #3798. [↑](#footnote-ref-24920)
22. Cf. Nahum Sarna, The JPS Torah Commentary: Exodus. [↑](#footnote-ref-28248)
23. Douglas K. Stuart, Exodus [NAC], 2:286. [↑](#footnote-ref-13714)
24. Besides its contradiction of the biblical dates, see David Rohl, Pharaohs and Kings; Donovan Courville, The Exodus Problem and Its Ramifications. [↑](#footnote-ref-10981)
25. See E. W. Bullinger, Companion Bible; Martin Anstey, Romance of Bible Chronology; Floyd N. Jones, The Chronology of the Old Testament. [↑](#footnote-ref-13464)
26. George Bush, Exodus, 188. [↑](#footnote-ref-24825)
27. Nahum Sarna, The JPS Torah Commentary: Exodus, 88. [↑](#footnote-ref-11116)
28. See George Bush, Commentary on Exodus; Keil and Delitzsch. [↑](#footnote-ref-17847)
29. The Complete Jewish Bible, https://www.chabad.org/library/bible\_cdo/aid/9880/showrashi/true, accessed October 22, 2024. [↑](#footnote-ref-12605)
30. See Koehler and Baumgartner, HALOT Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament. [↑](#footnote-ref-24855)
31. Maxie Dunnam, Mastering the Old Testament: Exodus. [↑](#footnote-ref-13166)
32. Theodore de Bruyn, “Christian Amulets—A Bit of Old, a Bit of New,” Biblical Archaeological Review, September/October 2018. [↑](#footnote-ref-17335)
33. Nahum Sarna, The JPS Torah Commentary: Exodus, 110. [↑](#footnote-ref-17522)
34. Maxie Dunnam, Mastering the Old Testament: Exodus, 263. [↑](#footnote-ref-30705)
35. Umberto Cassuto, A Commentary on the Book of Exodus, 252. [↑](#footnote-ref-18365)
36. E. W. Bullinger, Figures of Speech Used in the Bible, 135. [↑](#footnote-ref-28336)
37. The Complete Jewish Bible, https://www.chabad.org/library/bible\_cdo/aid/9881. Accessed October 22, 2024. [↑](#footnote-ref-28259)
38. Nahum Sarna, The JPS Torah Commentary: Exodus. Note on Exod. 20:26. [↑](#footnote-ref-22784)
39. James Jordan, The Law of the Covenant, 27-28. [↑](#footnote-ref-15621)
40. Sarah Pomeroy, Goddesses, Whores, Wives, and Slaves, 168. [↑](#footnote-ref-15485)
41. Nahum Sarna, The JPS Torah Commentary: Exodus, 127. [↑](#footnote-ref-10475)
42. U. Cassuto, A Commentary on the Book of Exodus, 283. [↑](#footnote-ref-13087)
43. Umberto Cassuto, A Commentary on the Book of Exodus, 290-91. [↑](#footnote-ref-12657)
44. Cassuto, A Commentary on the Book of Exodus, 290. Hebrew spellings have been adjusted for clarity in English. [↑](#footnote-ref-30394)
45. Michael Grant, Eros in Pompeii, 94-95. [↑](#footnote-ref-15431)
46. See E. W. Bullinger, Figures of Speech Used in the Bible, 804-06, “amphibologia.” [↑](#footnote-ref-29729)
47. E. W. Bullinger, Figures of Speech Used in the Bible, 159-164. [↑](#footnote-ref-23008)
48. U. Cassuto, A Commentary on the Book of Exodus, 305. [↑](#footnote-ref-21847)
49. U. Cassuto, A Commentary on the Book of Exodus, 308. [↑](#footnote-ref-28279)
50. Brown, Driver, Briggs Hebrew and English Lexicon, s.v. “זָרַק.” [↑](#footnote-ref-11767)
51. Merrill Tenney, The Zondervan Pictorial Encyclopedia of the Bible, s.v. “Badger,” 451. [↑](#footnote-ref-29935)
52. Everett Fox, The Schocken Bible. [↑](#footnote-ref-22474)
53. Everett Fox, The Schocken Bible. [↑](#footnote-ref-14828)
54. Robert Alter, The Hebrew Bible: The Five Books of Moses, 2004 ed, 462. [↑](#footnote-ref-11479)
55. Nahum Sarna, The JPS Torah Commentary: Exodus, 161. [↑](#footnote-ref-20637)
56. John Walton, Victor Matthews, and Mark Chavalas, IVP Bible Background Commentary: Old Testament, 127. [↑](#footnote-ref-28704)
57. 150 feet; 45.72 meters [↑](#footnote-ref-26511)
58. 7.5 feet; 2.28 meters [↑](#footnote-ref-23167)
59. 75 feet; 22.86 [↑](#footnote-ref-13720)
60. Everett Fox, The Schocken Bible. [↑](#footnote-ref-28201)
61. Umberto Cassuto, A Commentary on the Book of Exodus, 378. [↑](#footnote-ref-15743)
62. Nahum Sarna, The JPS Torah Commentary: Exodus, entry on Exod. 28:41, accessed in Accordance Bible Software. [↑](#footnote-ref-20762)
63. HALOT Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament. [↑](#footnote-ref-23573)
64. Koehler and Baumgartner, HALOT Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon; Holladay, Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon. [↑](#footnote-ref-13512)
65. Douglas K. Stuart, Exodus [NAC], 624. [↑](#footnote-ref-23904)
66. Cf. Douglas K. Stuart, Exodus [NAC], 625. [↑](#footnote-ref-24466)
67. C. S. Cansdale, All the Animals of the Bible Lands, 49. [↑](#footnote-ref-22348)
68. William Thompson, The Land & The Book, 96-97. [↑](#footnote-ref-27820)
69. Cf. Douglas K. Stuart, Exodus [NAC], 628. [↑](#footnote-ref-31746)
70. Nahum Sarna, The JPS Torah Commentary: Exodus, 192. [↑](#footnote-ref-28434)
71. Umberto Cassuto, A Commentary on the Book of Exodus, 413. [↑](#footnote-ref-12218)
72. C. F. Keil and F. Delitzsch, Commentary on the Old Testament, 466. [↑](#footnote-ref-11488)
73. Or “worshiped it” [↑](#footnote-ref-31832)
74. Umberto Cassuto, A Commentary on the Book of Exodus. [↑](#footnote-ref-30745)
75. See E. W. Bullinger, Figures of Speech Used in the Bible, 151, “aposiopesis.” [↑](#footnote-ref-27038)
76. Nahum Sarna, The JPS Torah Commentary: Exodus, 218. [↑](#footnote-ref-14239)
77. Umberto Cassuto, A Commentary on the Book of Exodus, 445. [↑](#footnote-ref-32298)
78. Nahum Sarna, The JPS Torah Commentary: Exodus, 222. [↑](#footnote-ref-14691)
79. Umberto Cassuto, A Commentary on the Book of Exodus, 497. [↑](#footnote-ref-31580)
80. Umberto Cassuto, A Commentary on the Book of Exodus, 480. [↑](#footnote-ref-20945)
81. James Strong, The Tabernacle of Israel in the Desert, 28-39. [↑](#footnote-ref-19977)
82. James Strong, The Tabernacle of Israel in the Desert, 39n37. [↑](#footnote-ref-16489)
83. Roy Lee DeWitt, Teaching from the Tabernacle, 58, 59, 62. [↑](#footnote-ref-32335)