

Chapter
3
GOD'S COVENANT
WITH ISRAEL

TIMELINE

3000–2000 B.C.E.	Beginnings of civilization in Mesopotamia (Sumer, Babylonia, Assyria) and in the areas of Syria and Canaan.
c. 1850–1750? B.C.E.	Abraham migrates to Canaan. Beginnings of the patriarchal period.
c. 1700 B.C.E.	The <i>Enuma Elish</i> is circulated in Babylonian culture.
c. 1300–1250 B.C.E.	Moses delivers God's people from Egypt in the Exodus. God's covenant people journey to the promised land.

The preceding chapter of this textbook provided us with an overview of Genesis' primordial stories about creation and the origins of sin in the world (Gen 1–11). As we move into the second major section of the book of Genesis (Gen 12–50), we encounter a different kind of literature, namely **legend**. Unlike myths, which often have settings that are outside of space and time and characters that are larger than life, legends are situated in human history and involve characters and events that are part of the historical memories of the people who preserved them. However, even though legends carry more concrete historical recollections than the primordial stories, the primary purpose of legends is not to relate historically accurate details of ancient events. Rather, their purpose is to edify their readers and provide examples of the traditions, values, and ideals that these people hold sacred.

Genesis 12–50 contains legends about the earliest identifiable ancestors of the Israelite people: Abraham and Sarah; Isaac and Rebekah; and Jacob, his wives, and his twelve sons, especially Joseph. It ends with stories about how Abraham's descendants were transplanted to Egypt, where they were eventually enslaved. The second book of the Bible, Exodus, picks up the salvation narrative with Moses, whom YHWH called to lead the Israelites out of slavery in Egypt to the Promised Land. Moses is the one who received the Law from YHWH on Mount Sinai. Through these human persons, YHWH intervened in history on behalf of one particular people, the Israelites. Thus, the stories tell of the Exodus, in which Moses leads the Israelites out of slavery in Egypt. The theological term used to explain this phenomenon of peoplehood is **covenant**, which means "contract" or "agreement." This chapter will provide an overview of two important figures in Israel's covenant history, namely, Abraham and Moses, and one of its central events, Passover. Later inheritors of these stories and traditions, Christians in particular, will understand that God's intervention had a wider purpose than the salvation of Israel alone.

ABRAHAM

Genesis 12–25 tells the story of Abram, the son of Terah, from the land of the Chaldeans, who lived sometime around the end of the nineteenth or beginning of the eighteenth century B.C.E. Abram, whose name would eventually be changed to **Abraham**, first encountered YHWH at Haran in northern Mesopotamia. YHWH spoke to Abram with authority and made a promise to him.

Now the LORD said to Abram, "Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you. I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you, and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and the one who curses you I will curse; and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed." (Gen 12:1–3)

This passage introduces several important theological themes associated with the Abraham stories: Abraham's encounter with God, God's promise and Abraham's response (faith), and the notion of covenant.

Abraham's Encounter with God

The stories contained in the book of Genesis were already ancient at the time of their writing. The authors who put these oral traditions into writing understood that God had

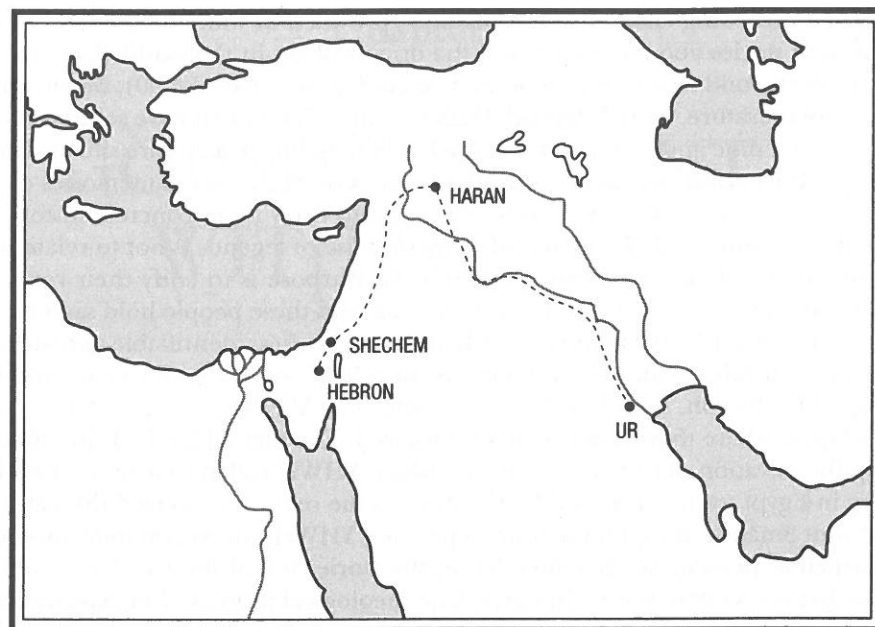


Figure 3-1 The journey of Abraham from Ur to Canaan.

revealed himself to Abram, making him the first **patriarch** (father or founder) of their people. Genesis preserves three versions of the story of Abram's encounter with God (Gen 12:1-9; 15:1-21; 17:1-27). In Genesis 12, the reader is given no information about what Abram's encounter with God was like. We are simply to understand that it was God's initiative to enter into a relationship with him, to establish a new people, and eventually to bring this people into the land that would be known as Israel, then called Canaan.

In Genesis 15, the narrator of the story describes Abram's experience of divine revelation in some detail. YHWH introduced himself as Abram's shield of protection (Gen 15:1). Then, after performing a ritual as YHWH commanded him, Abram fell into a deep sleep, and a deep and terrifying darkness surrounded him, as YHWH spoke to him concerning the future destiny of his descendants (Gen 15:12-16). Finally, Abram saw a vision of a smoking fire pot and flaming torch (Gen 15:17-21). The narrator of the story suggests that it was YHWH who appeared to Abram in the smoking fire pot and flaming torch and he did so in order to make covenant with Abram.

Genesis 17 provides yet another account of YHWH's revelation to Abram. In this account, YHWH introduces himself as God Almighty (Gen 17:1). The divine name is El Shaddai, "the God of the Mountains." The narrator of the story tells us that El Shaddai invited Abram to walk in his presence and that he spoke with him (Gen 17:1-3), making this a direct and personal encounter. Later, YHWH changed Abram's name to Abraham, because he intended to make Abraham "the father of a host of nations" (Gen 17:5). He also talked with Abraham about what was in store for Sarai, Ishmael, and Isaac (Gen 17:15-21), making YHWH a determiner of destinies.

Common to all three of these stories is the belief that YHWH is a personal God who is not only capable of relationship with human beings but who also initiates these encounters.

These stories also make the point that God made God's self known to Abram in history, that is, in Abram's own place and time. Finally, as we shall see, all three stories describe a promise that God made to Abraham and an expectation that Abraham would respond in faith, that is, trusting that God will fulfill the promise.

God's Promise and Abraham's Response

According to the book of Genesis, YHWH offered Abram a vision of a new future, which came in the form of a promise. The promise has several aspects: (1) He will have many descendants (Gen 15:5; 17:2); (2) God will make him a great nation (Gen 12:2; 17:5-6); (3) through him all nations of the earth will be blessed (Gen 12:3); and (4) he will be given a land for his descendants to live in (Gen 12:7; 15:7; 17:8). These ancient traditions are the basis of the Israelite and Jewish convictions that they were God's chosen people living in a Promised Land. Further, YHWH told Abram to trust the promise, to leave his own land and his own people, and to follow the directions that he is given (Gen 12:1, 4). Thus, Abram was challenged to believe what YHWH is saying and to trust that YHWH can bring it about.

However, once Abraham arrived in the land of Canaan, with his wife Sarai, his nephew Lot, and the rest of their clan, his trust was tested, and he did not always respond well. We learn, for example, that he and his kin moved about through the land of Canaan, which was already populated by other peoples, until a famine drove them to Egypt. Because his wife Sarai was very beautiful, Abram feared that the Egyptians would kill him so that the pharaoh could take Sarai into his harem (Gen 12:10-20). Therefore, in order to protect himself, Abram told them that Sarai was his sister. Believing that she was unmarried, the pharaoh took her as his wife, but YHWH rescued her by afflicting the pharaoh and his house with plagues. Later, virtually the same story is repeated with a different king (Gen 20:1-18). In both cases, Abram risked losing Sarai, the one through whom God's promise to Abram would be fulfilled, to save himself.

Genesis contains several other stories about Abraham's failure to trust God's promise. For example, the narrator tells us that Abram thought that YHWH was acting too slowly in fulfilling his promise of a son, so, at the suggestion of Sarai, Abram had sexual relations with her slave girl, Hagar (Gen 15:2-3; 16:1-4). Hagar gave birth to a son named **Ishmael** (Gen 16:15). Under the customs of the time, such a child would still be considered the child of Abram and Sarai. The point of the story is that Abram tried to fulfill God's promise by his own means, but YHWH let Abram know that this was not the descendant through whom the mighty nation would be established (Gen 17:19-22). Instead, YHWH promised Abraham that Sarai, who was already an old woman, would have a son, and God delivered on the promise with the birth of **Isaac** (Gen 17:15-17; 21:1-8). Then, just as everything seemed to be falling into place, YHWH asked Abraham to take Isaac, his son, the only one through whom God's promises could be fulfilled, and offer him as a sacrifice (Gen 22:1-19). Abraham proved his faith and stood ready to sacrifice his son, but the angel of YHWH intervened and provided an animal for Abraham to sacrifice instead.

Whatever his earlier doubts about God's ability to fulfill his promise, Abraham finally demonstrated his total trust in YHWH through his willingness to give up his only beloved son. In a sense, everything in Abraham's life had been leading to this point. The writers of the New Testament—Paul, in particular—will later refer to Abraham as a model of faith, because he "believed the LORD; and the LORD reckoned it to him as righteousness" (Gen 15:6).

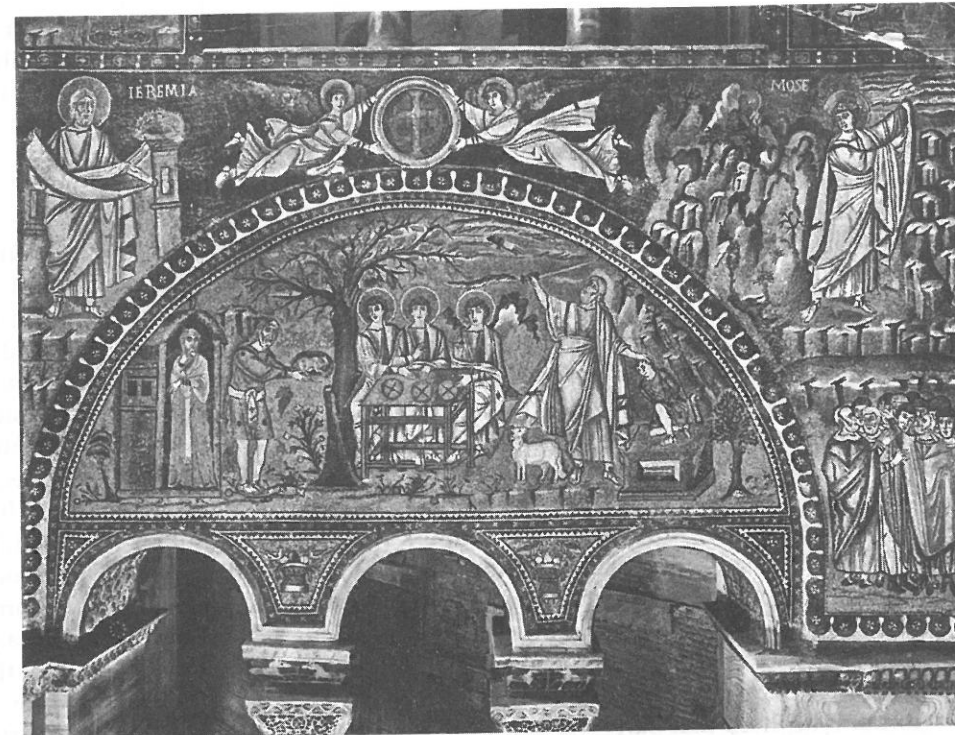


Figure 3-2 Mosaic in San Vitale, Ravenna. The illustration in the center describes the scene in which three visitors come to Abraham at the oak of Mamre to announce Isaac's birth. The illustration on the right describes the scene of Abraham's near-sacrifice of Isaac (see Gen 18:1-15 and 22:1-19).

Covenant

In the ancient world, covenants were used for a variety of purposes, including the sealing of treaties and contracts between kings and their subjects. Simply stated, a covenant is a solemn agreement between two parties (individuals or groups) listing their respective rights and responsibilities in the relationship. Because it was sealed with an oath, ancient covenants carried a religious significance—a sense of being guaranteed by God. In the book of Genesis, YHWH is described as confirming his promise to Abraham and his descendants by “making a covenant” with Abraham. In fact, Genesis describes two covenant rituals between YHWH and Abraham. Here is a description of the first one:

[YHWH] said to [Abram], “Bring me a heifer three years old, a female goat three years old, a ram three years old, a turtledove, and a young pigeon.” He brought him all these and cut them in two, laying each half over against the other, but he did not cut the birds in two. And when birds of prey came down on the carcasses, Abram drove them away.

As the sun was going down, a deep sleep fell upon Abram, and a deep and terrifying darkness descended upon him.

When the sun had gone down and it was dark, a smoking fire pot and a flaming torch passed between these pieces. On that day the LORD made a covenant with Abram. (Gen 15:9-13; 17-18)

The detail about YHWH (manifested in the fire pot and flaming torch) passing between butchered animals is very strange to modern readers. The implication of this ritual is that the covenant partners agree to submit to the curse of becoming like the divided animals if they do not adhere to the terms of the covenant. Modern people also sometimes seal solemn promises and agreements with an oath or a ritual. For example, witnesses in court promise to tell the truth “so help me God.” The sense of the phrase “so help me God” is that God will punish the one who does not tell the truth. In the quotation above, the animals are split in two, and God passes between them as a promise of God's faithfulness to the covenant he made with Abraham.

A second ritual in the Abraham stories highlights the importance of circumcision as a seal of the covenant between God and Abraham's descendants:

This is my covenant which you shall keep, between me and you and your offspring after you: Every male among you shall be circumcised. You shall circumcise the flesh of your foreskins, and it shall be a sign of the covenant between me and you. Throughout your generations every male among you shall be circumcised when he is eight days old, including the slave born in your house and the one bought with your money from any foreigner who is not of your offspring . . . So shall my covenant be in your flesh an everlasting covenant. (Gen 17:10-14)

The covenant described in Genesis 15 placed no obligations on Abraham. He simply needed to trust in the promise that God made with him—a promise of many descendants and land for them to occupy. However, in this version, Abraham and his descendants are obligated to perform the ritual of circumcision as a symbol of their acceptance of God's covenant and the responsibilities that come with it. Known as a *bris* or *brit mila*, this ritual continues to be performed today as a visible sign of induction into the everlasting covenant that God made with the Israelites.

JACOB AND THE TWELVE TRIBES OF ISRAEL

Genesis 24-50 goes on to narrate stories about Abraham's descendants, especially Isaac, Jacob, and Jacob's twelve sons, who would later be looked upon as the founders of the twelve tribes of Israel. The stories serve several purposes, not least of which was helping the Israelites create a common identity by sharing stories about their origins. They also make a point of establishing just which people are, in fact, descendants and heirs of the promises made to Abraham, including the Promised Land. Thus, the stories describe how some of Abraham's descendants were chosen to inherit the promise, but others were not. In Genesis 12-23, we learned how God chose Isaac, not Ishmael, even though both were Abraham's sons and Ishmael was the firstborn. Here, we learn how God chose Jacob over Esau, even though Esau was the first of the twins born to Isaac and Rebekah (Gen 25:19-26). Through cunning and deceit, Jacob stole the birthright of primary inheritance, which rightfully belonged to Esau, and his dying father's special blessing (Gen 25:27-34; 27:1-40). Thus, against all human standards of justice, Jacob became the inheritor of God's promise to Abraham.

The Genesis stories go on to describe how Jacob himself later became the victim of deceit. Esau was so angry about what Jacob had done to him that he threatened to kill him. Therefore, their mother Rebekah arranged for Jacob to leave the country under the pretense

of finding a bride from among their kinfolk (Gen 27:41–28:22). He found the bride he wanted, but then he was shamelessly tricked by his uncle Laban into working an extra seven years and taking an extra wife, in order to obtain his desired bride, Rachel (Gen 29:15–30). Finally, after years in exile and a wrestling match with a mysterious heavenly being, he was able to return to his family and his homeland (Gen 32:1–33:20). It is during this wrestling match that Jacob was given his new name **Israel**, from which the Israelites took their name.

Just who was a legitimate descendant of Abraham was an important question in biblical times, since God's promises were made not to just anyone but specifically to Abraham and his descendants. The importance of descent from Abraham partially explains the frequency with which biblical passages record the genealogies of the characters involved in the story. However, it should be recognized that one did not necessarily need to be from the bloodline of Abraham to claim him as an ancestor and to be considered part of the covenant people. The genealogies did not always reflect biological reality but were often more of a political statement used to indicate inclusion and exclusion within a particular group or tribe. Indeed, the stories of the patriarchs in general are motivated more by political and theological concerns than by the desire to describe history with perfect accuracy.

This is not to say that the stories about the patriarchs have no historical basis. Studies have shown, for example, that customs presupposed in the patriarchal stories accurately fit the period in which the patriarchs are thought to have lived, suggesting that other details of these stories could be historically accurate, as well. On the other hand, modern readers need to know that the writers and readers of the Old Testament understood these stories differently than we often do. For the original writers and readers, the genealogies and stories about the ancestors of tribes and nations were not intended to provide historical documentation of the lives of individuals from the past. Rather, they viewed them as describing, in narrative form, relationships among these tribes and nations as they currently existed. This difference in interpretation reflects the deep cultural differences that exist between the original readers of the Old Testament and modern Western readers.

A Cultural Difference: Genealogies

Among Arabian tribes today, whatever might be the biological reality, all members of a given tribe consider themselves to be descended from the tribe's common ancestors. If strangers join the tribe, they do so "in name and in blood," in a way similar to Western practices of adoption. That is, they take the tribe's ancestors as their own and promise to marry and raise their families within the tribe. The Arabs say that the newcomers have been "genealogized."

When two or more tribes enter into close relationship, for example, a confederation of several tribes or the absorption of a weak tribe by a stronger one, a similar process occurs. If the two tribes are of relatively equal power, they may begin to speak of their common ancestors as brothers and sisters, much as they have now become brothers and sisters by the confederation. If one tribe is dominant over the other, the ancestors' relationship will be spoken of in a way that reflects dominance—for example, as uncle and nephew or father and son.

It is likely that the tribes of the Bible had similar practices. In fact, we can see an example of genealogizing in the Bible itself. In the stories of the conquest of Canaan, Caleb was a member of a tribe foreign to Israel, but he chose to ally himself with Israel

and cooperated significantly with the Israelite tribes in the process of spying out and conquering the land (Num 13:30–14:45). As a result, he and his family were genealogized into the tribe of Judah: They were given a share in the tribe's land, and Caleb, despite his actual foreign birth, was from that time on spoken of as a member of the tribe of Judah and as a descendant of Judah, the founder of the tribe.

As the Genesis stories continue, we learn that Jacob (Israel) had twelve sons by his two wives and two of their maids. **Joseph** and Benjamin were the two sons by Jacob's favorite wife, Rachel, and Jacob favored them more than the others (Gen 35:16–26). Jacob's other sons resented the fact that he favored Joseph most of all, so they sold him as a slave to some traders going to Egypt and told Jacob he had been eaten by wild animals (Gen 37:1–36). Forcibly relocated to Egypt, Joseph quickly became very successful under his slave owner, Potiphar, who was an officer of the Egyptian pharaoh. The narrator of the story attributes Joseph's good success to God's protection, saying, "and the Lord was with him" (Gen 39:3). But then Potiphar's wife tried to seduce Joseph, and he was imprisoned on a false charge of attempted rape (Gen 39:7–20). But even in his incarceration, he remained safe, because "the Lord was with him" (Gen 39:21). Eventually Joseph was rescued from prison, after he successfully interpreted for the pharaoh a pair of dreams about an impending famine (Gen 41:1–36). The pharaoh was so grateful to receive Joseph's interpretation that he appointed him to a position of great authority and put him in charge of famine preparations for all the people of Egypt (Gen 41:37–45).

After seven years of prosperity, famine came upon the land just as Joseph had predicted, and people from the surrounding areas were forced to come to Egypt to buy food. Jacob sent his sons also to buy food in Egypt, but he did not allow Benjamin to go, because he was afraid of losing him as he had lost Joseph many years earlier. Thus, the same men who once sold Joseph into slavery were forced to appear before him and beg for food, but they did not recognize who he was (Gen 42:1–8). Joseph did not reveal his identity to them, but instead treated them harshly and even forced one of them to stay behind until they would return with Benjamin (Gen 42:9–28). At first Jacob did not allow it, but as the famine grew more severe he gave in because they had no food (Gen 43:11–15). Joseph treated them well when they returned to Egypt, but when they left to go back home he set up a trap so that Benjamin would be forced to stay behind (Gen 43:16–44:1–13). After much pleading from his brother Judah, Joseph finally revealed his identity, forgave his brothers their earlier wrongdoing, and invited the whole family to resettle in Egypt (Gen 44:14–45:20).

Finally Jacob was reunited with Joseph, his beloved son, and he and his family lived in Egypt and prospered because of their association with Joseph. Eventually Jacob died and, many years later, Joseph died, as well. Before his passing, he told his brothers that God would come and bring them out of Egypt to the land that God had promised to Abraham. He asked only one thing—that they take his bones with them to the land of their ancestors (Gen 50:22–26). Thus the book of Genesis ends on a note of expectation.

MOSES

The second book of the Bible is Exodus, meaning "going out." It picks up Israel's story of salvation where Genesis left off—with the descendants of the twelve brothers of Jacob living in Egypt. They lived there peacefully for several generations, until an Egyptian pharaoh

came into power who did not know about Joseph and who was not favorably disposed toward the Israelite people (Exod 1:1–10). He feared their prosperity and their large numbers, and therefore he enslaved them in various work projects. He oppressed them greatly but they continued to prosper, so he treated them even more harshly (Exod 1:11–15). The situation of the Israelite slaves in Egypt was truly desperate! With this scene, the stage is set for the book of Exodus.

The opening chapters of the book of Exodus introduce the reader to **Moses**, who is a central character of the book and the leader of the **Exodus**, the “going out” of the descendants of Jacob from slavery to the Promised Land. It is described as perhaps the most important formative experience of the Israelite people, because from that experience their community and their religion were created. Moses is thought to have lived sometime during the middle part of the thirteenth century B.C.E. According to the book of Exodus, YHWH again took the initiative, this time by calling Moses. YHWH directed and empowered Moses to rescue YHWH’s people—the descendants of Abraham—from slavery in Egypt. He led them through the wilderness, established another covenant with them, and settled them successfully in the Promised Land. This new covenant, which they received at Mount Sinai, shaped their religious and community life and acted as their “constitution.” (The Sinai covenant still serves today as the constitution of the State of Israel.) Thus, YHWH fulfilled the promises to Abraham expressed in the earlier covenant—that he would have many descendants and a land for them to live in. Perhaps the most well-known feature of this Mosaic (meaning “belonging to or associated with Moses”) covenant is the Ten Commandments.

Moses the Prophet

Moses is called a prophet, the first and most important of the great Israelite prophets. The central point of prophecy is that **prophets** are spokespersons for God. The great Israelite prophets, like Moses in the book of Exodus, were called and chosen by God. They were given messages from God to deliver to others, and they experienced a powerful compulsion to convey those messages despite their own fears or misgivings. In a sense, God spoke *through* them to communicate in concrete ways with God’s people.

Moses experienced his prophetic call while in exile in a wilderness area called Midian. He had escaped to this land to avoid the wrath of Pharaoh, after killing an Egyptian whom he found beating an Israelite slave (Exod 2:11–15). This day he was shepherding the flocks of Jethro, the priest of Midian, who had befriended him when he first came to Midian and among whose daughters he had found his wife, Zipporah (Exod 3:1; see also 2:15–22). YHWH first attracted Moses’ attention by appearing in a bush that was burning but not being consumed by the fire. As Moses came closer to check out this amazing sight, YHWH introduced himself saying, “I am the God of your father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob” (Exod 3:6). In other words, this was no new and strange deity who appeared to Moses in the wilderness. Rather, this deity already has a long and storied relationship with the Israelite people. Thus YHWH called Moses, told him that he had heard the cries of his oppressed people, and commanded him to lead YHWH’s people out of slavery in Egypt to a land “flowing with milk and honey” (Exod 3:7–8).

God commanded Moses to announce this message to Pharaoh and to the Israelite people. Moses tried to avoid the responsibility, finally asking YHWH to “send someone else,” but YHWH would not accept Moses’ refusal. Fearful that the people would not listen to him,

Moses asked God what his name was and received that famous and mysterious answer, “I am who am,” which, among numerous other explanations, has been variously understood as “I am who exists without being caused by another,” “I am who causes to be,” or “I am who I am” (Exod 3:13–15). In Hebrew the name is YHWH (Hebrew was written without vowels), but Jews consider the name too sacred to pronounce, substituting instead the word “Lord” (in Hebrew, *Adonai*) wherever the name of YHWH is written. In the Exodus stories about Moses, the writers consistently refer to God as YHWH.

Assisted by his brother **Aaron** the Levite, Moses finally accepted his assignment and returned to Egypt with his message for the ruling pharaoh, who was brutally oppressing the enslaved Israelites (Exod 4:27–31). The message was this: YHWH says, “Let my people go” (Exod 5:1). Thus began a confrontation between Moses and Pharaoh that the book of Exodus portrays as a confrontation between YHWH and the gods of the Egyptians. However, it would be a mistake to conclude from these stories that the Israelite people were entirely monotheistic at this point in their history. At the time of the Exodus, and probably for centuries afterwards, neither the Israelites nor their neighbors thought of YHWH as being the only real God. Rather, the Israelites thought YHWH was the only God *for them* (and often enough they were not faithful even to this conviction). Only much later would they become convinced that their God was the only true God of all.

In order to get the Egyptian pharaoh to release the Israelite slaves, YHWH gave Moses several “magic tricks” and a series of plagues to use against the Egyptians. However, only when God killed all of the Egyptian firstborn did the pharaoh finally release them. In the wilderness, God continued to protect and guide them by providing them with safe passage across the Red (reed) sea, giving them food and water, and finally granting them entrance into the Promised Land. The Exodus stories that describe this confrontation between Moses and the pharaoh, and the events that followed, reveal a number of characteristics of YHWH:

1. YHWH was much more powerful than the Egyptian gods and the gods of the Canaanites.
2. YHWH cared about relieving earthly oppression and providing for material needs; YHWH rescued the Israelites from slavery and settled them in a land that had enough resources to support them.
3. YHWH supported the Israelites in desert places where food and water could not otherwise be found.
4. YHWH was a strong warrior who led Israel in battle against hostile neighbors.

Some modern theologians have drawn attention to these same characteristics of God to challenge churches to work for justice and to counteract the attitude that prevails among some Christians that religious people should only be concerned with life after death. Their argument can be summed up as follows: The Bible shows us that God stands on the side of the poor and oppressed, defending them, and providing for their needs. Therefore we must do the same.

These same Exodus narratives also reveal some interesting characteristics of the Israelites:

1. While they did not enjoy being slaves in Egypt, they were not inclined to try to escape. YHWH and Moses had to push them to cooperate.

2. They did not have much confidence in YHWH's power. They were "slow learners" who kept forgetting how YHWH had just saved them, and they repeatedly failed to trust YHWH's protection.
3. They were constantly grumbling about the hardships they were experiencing and blaming YHWH and Moses for their suffering.
4. Throughout the events of the Exodus, it was YHWH who took all the initiative. Left to themselves, the Israelites probably would have remained where they were, enslaved in Egypt.

Thus the Exodus stories also reveal that YHWH chose the Israelite people not because of their good qualities, but in spite of their "stiff necks" (stubbornness). Why YHWH chose them remained a mystery even to the Israelites themselves. In the New Testament, Paul will remark that other peoples, including Christians, should not feel superior in this respect, since no one is worthy of God's call, and no one has lived up to God's call very well.

The following box summarizes YHWH's conflict with the gods of Egypt. Note how the story is told to show that YHWH is more powerful than the Egyptian gods.

The Ten Plagues

In the book of Exodus, the battle between YHWH and the gods of Egypt is illustrated through a series of ten plagues. At first, the Egyptian magicians could duplicate the plagues Moses was producing (though in an inferior way). But when God sent the third plague they not only failed to duplicate it, they also publicly admitted that YHWH had won the contest. As the plagues went on, other members of the pharaoh's court became convinced that YHWH had won and tried to convince the pharaoh to give up. They also took steps to protect themselves, but the pharaoh held out, making insincere and inadequate promises, only to go back on them again and again. Of course, for the Israelite people, these were not plagues but rather miracles that demonstrated God's care and protection. Here is a summary of the ten plagues.

1. Water into blood (Exod 7:14–24). After Moses turned the water of the Nile River into blood, Pharaoh refused to release the Israelites because his magicians could duplicate the plague.
2. Frogs (Exod 7:25–8:15). After Moses brought swarms of frogs down upon the Egyptians, another plague that the Egyptian magicians could duplicate, Pharaoh promised Moses that if he took away the frogs he would release the Israelites, but he later broke his promise.
3. Gnats (Exod 8:16–19). With the third plague, the Egyptian magicians were unable to keep up and told Pharaoh, "This is the finger of God." But Pharaoh continued to refuse to release the Israelites.
4. Flies (Exod 8: 20–32). The swarms of flies did not affect the land of Goshen, where the Israelites dwelled. YHWH said, "Thus I will make a distinction between my people and your people." Once again Pharaoh broke a promise to release the Israelites long enough to sacrifice to YHWH.
5. Pestilence (Exod 9:1–7). When this plague brought disease upon all the livestock of the Egyptians, YHWH again showed his preference for Israel by sparing their flocks. The pharaoh was not moved.

6. Boils (Exod 9:8–12). The festering boils affected both animals and humans, even the Egyptian magicians, but the pharaoh still refused to release the Israelites.
7. Hail and thunder (Exod 9:13–35). The hail and thunder that affected every region except the land of Goshen were so terrible that the pharaoh immediately summoned Moses and promised to release the Israelites, but he reneged on his promise as soon as the storms ceased.
8. Locusts (Exod 10:1–20). When Moses threatened the Egyptians with clouds of locusts that would devour their crops, the pharaoh agreed to let the men go, but he insisted they leave the women and children behind. This was not acceptable to Moses, and he struck the Egyptians with the plague. The pharaoh beseeched Moses to end the plague and made another promise that he failed to fulfill.
9. Darkness (Exod 10:21–29). After three days of darkness, the pharaoh agreed to let the Israelites go, as long as they left behind all of their livestock, but this was not acceptable to Moses.
10. Death of the firstborn (Exod 11:1–10). YHWH came and struck dead the firstborn of all the Egyptians and their livestock. The Israelites were told to sacrifice a lamb and mark their doors with the blood, so that YHWH would pass over their houses. After the plague, all the Egyptians, mourning their dead, urged the Israelites to go and gave them their valuables. The pharaoh told Moses and the Israelites to go. The next day he changed his mind and pursued them.

One of the most curious features of the story about the confrontation between Moses and the Egyptian pharaoh is the way YHWH "hardens the pharaoh's heart" (e.g., Exod 8:19), thus delaying YHWH's victory and keeping the conflict going. The result of this hardening is to demonstrate YHWH's power more strikingly than would have been the case had the pharaoh been more reasonable. It becomes clear that YHWH has the power to overcome any resistance, no matter how strong it is. At the same time, this feature of the story has raised many questions for later theologians, especially questions about what causes evil and whether humans truly have free will. The problematic character of this story is also reflected in later Jewish traditions: The Passover ritual (Seder), for example, includes the admonition, "Do not celebrate. Egyptians are dying." However, the authors and the original readers of these stories were probably not concerned with these questions and problems. They were just enjoying the story, watching YHWH play with an arrogant pharaoh as a cat might play with a mouse.

Passover

The climax of YHWH's contest with the pharaoh is the tenth plague, the death of the firstborn. Before carrying out this plague, YHWH directed the Israelites to sacrifice a lamb and mark their doorways with the lamb's blood. When the angel came to kill the firstborn and saw the blood-marked doorways, the angel passed over those houses without causing any harm (Exod 12:1–28). The annual feast that later commemorated this event took the name *Passover* from this passing over. Historically, the Passover marked the beginning of the Israelites' Exodus from Egypt and their journey to the Promised Land.

Passage Through the Red Sea

Once they had escaped from Egypt, the Israelites found themselves in a new crisis. The pharaoh had changed his mind again and was pursuing them with his whole army, and they were trapped on the shore of the Red Sea. But YHWH directed Moses to hold up his staff over the waters of the sea, and when he did, YHWH parted the waters so that the Israelites could pass through on dry land. When the Egyptians tried to follow, YHWH let the waters flow back and thus drowned their army.

What kind of miracle had the Israelites witnessed? There are two accounts of this event: a prose account in Exodus 14 and a poetic one in Exodus 15. Exodus 14:21 suggests that YHWH used a physical mechanism to divide the waters—a strong east wind that blew all night. However, the next verse describes an epic heightening of the same event that sounds more directly and flamboyantly miraculous: “the water like a wall to their left and their right” (Exod 14:22). Many scholars suggest that verse 21 is historically more likely, because they can point to another historical occasion when one of the shallow bodies of water in the Northern Sinai was divided by a strong wind, allowing an endangered group to escape. Still, it is likely that those who found themselves in this difficult situation would have considered it a miracle that this event happened just when they needed it. They would not have considered it to be “just a coincidence,” even if someone told them that it happened once before only a century earlier.

The poetic description of the escape through the Red Sea in Exodus 15, especially the short form, which is preserved in verse 21, is considered by biblical scholars to be one of the oldest traditions preserved in the Bible:

The prophetess Miriam, Aaron's sister, took a tambourine in her hand, while all the women went out after her with tambourines, dancing, and she led them in the refrain: “Sing to the Lord, for he is gloriously triumphant; horse and chariot he has cast into the sea.” (Exod 15:20–21)

It celebrates the Israelites' rescue as a miracle effected by God and as a cause for great rejoicing.

Wandering in the Wilderness

Once in the wilderness, the Israelites faced new problems. They had no experience of living in such a desolate area. They responded to these challenges by grumbling and blaming YHWH and Moses for their problems. YHWH took care of their needs, but he also showed displeasure at their grumbling and allowed them to suffer for their lack of faith. They grumbled that there was no food: YHWH gave them “manna” (Exod 16:1–36). They grumbled that they wanted meat: YHWH gave them quail (Exod 16:1–36). They grumbled that there was no water: YHWH gave them water from a rock (Exod 17:1–7). At one point, after Moses was absent for a prolonged period, they despaired and turned to the worship of false gods (Exod 32:1–35).

Finally, they grumbled that the inhabitants of Canaan were too strong for them to enter the Promised Land. As punishment, YHWH sent them back into the desert to wander for another forty years until all those who had failed to trust his power had died. YHWH would lead Jacob's descendants into the Promised Land, but not those who had refused to acknowledge YHWH's power (Num 14:1–38). In sum, for the Israelite people the wilderness became a symbol of identity making. It was during this period that YHWH initiated a

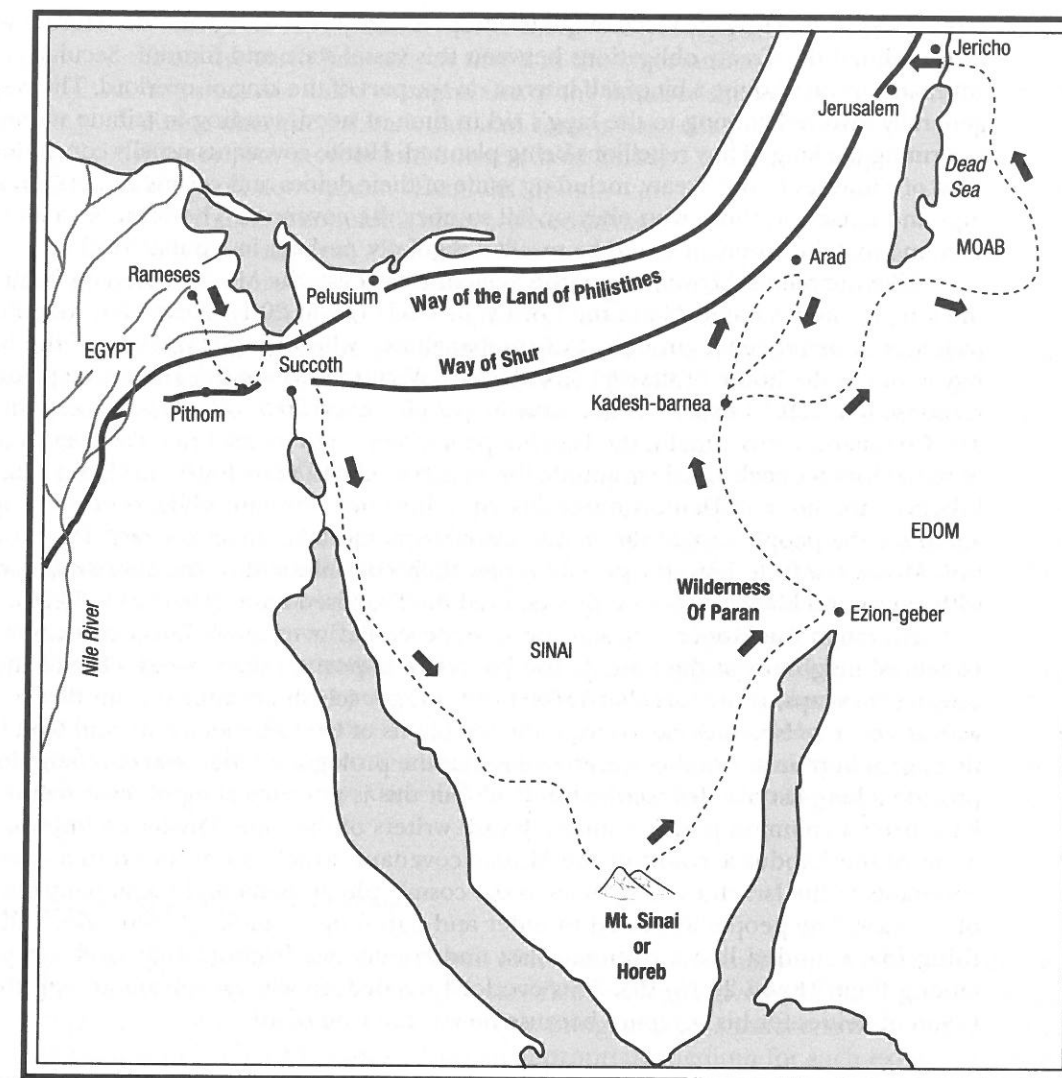


Figure 3-3 Map indicating the traditional route of the Exodus.

covenant with them and revealed himself to them as the God of Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and Joseph. It was there that YHWH taught them how they should live and how they should relate to God and to one another as God's chosen people.

Covenant at Sinai

The covenant that God made with Moses and the descendants of Jacob on Mount Sinai is similar in form to the political covenants among Israel's neighbors at the time. Some good examples are the Hittite covenants, which began with the king or overlord giving his name and titles of authority. Second, the king recalled his past acts of beneficence on behalf of the vassal, in

essence explaining why the vassal ought to accept the covenant with gratitude. Third, the overlord outlined the Treaty obligations between this vassal state and himself. Secular political covenants involved quite a bit of self-interest on the part of the king or overlord. The response generally involved coming to the king's aid in time of need, sending in tribute money, and informing the king of any rebellions being planned. Hittite covenants usually concluded with a list of witnesses to the Treaty, including some of their deities and cosmic powers, and blessings and curses on those who obey or fail to obey the covenant. There was also an understanding that the covenant would be recalled regularly, perhaps in a public reading.

Like the political covenants of the ancient Near East, the Mosaic covenant begins with the king giving his name: "I am the Lord your God" (Exod 20:1). Next, God described his past acts of beneficence on behalf of the Israelites: "who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery" (Exod 20:2). What follows are the Treaty obligations, the response that YHWH expects of the Israelite people (Exod 20:3-18). Today we call them the Ten Commandments. Finally, the Israelite people were told to celebrate Passover in a ritual of remembrance each year in gratitude for all that God had done for them (Exod 12:24-27). Likewise, the book of Deuteronomy describes how the covenant obligations were spoken aloud for the people so that they could learn them and take them to heart (Deut 5:1) and how Moses saw fit to have the people renew their commitment to the covenant, complete with curses and blessings, before they entered the Promised Land (Deut 29:1-30:20).

Although the Mosaic covenant bears some similarity to the political covenants of the Israelites' neighbors at the time, it also has some important differences. One of the most obvious, perhaps, is the fact that YHWH did not get selfish advantage from this covenant with Israel. The Israelites clearly were the recipients of God's benefaction, and God had little to gain in return. Another difference is that the prologue of the Sinai covenant does not provide a long list of titles ascribed to God, but this is not surprising, since it seems not to have been a common practice among Jewish writers of the time. Finally, an important element of the Exodus account of the Mosaic covenant, which is not found in any political covenants of the Israelites' neighbors, is the cosmic phenomena that accompany the giving of the Law. The people witnessed thunder and lightning, a smoking mountain, and something that sounded like a trumpet blast and concluded (rightly) that God was present among them (Exod 20:18-19). This overlord needed no witnesses from among the pantheon of deities for his covenant because he was the God of all!

The Ten Commandments

Anyone who reads the commandments from the Bible (Exod 20:3-20 or Deut 5:6-21) will notice that they are not numbered. In fact, it is not even clear that there should be exactly Ten Commandments. However, all Christian traditions do identify ten, though Catholic and Lutheran Christian traditions organize them differently than other Protestant traditions and Orthodox Christians do. The traditional Catholic and Lutheran enumeration of the Ten Commandments is listed below. Other Protestant traditions separate the first and second commandments on this list and combine the ninth and tenth into one final commandment.

1. I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery; you shall have no other gods before me. You shall not make for

- yourself an idol, whether in the form of anything that is in heaven above, or that is on the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth. (Exod 20:2-4)
2. You shall not make wrongful use of the name of the Lord your God. (Exod 20:7)
3. Remember the Sabbath day, and keep it holy. (Exod 20:8)
4. Honor your mother and father. (Exod 20:12)
5. You shall not murder. (Exod 20:13)
6. You shall not commit adultery. (Exod 20:14)
7. You shall not steal. (Exod 20:15)
8. You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor. (Exod 20:16)
9. You shall not covet your neighbor's house. (Exod 20:17a)
10. You shall not covet your neighbor's wife, or male or female slave, or ox, or donkey, or anything that belongs to him. (Exod 20:17b)

Some who are unfamiliar with the significance of the Mosaic covenant for Israel's salvation story sometimes think of the Ten Commandments as nothing more than a universal set of rules that have been passed down through the ages. Others read the many regulations governing food, work, worship, and other aspects of life contained in the books of Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy and conclude that the Israelite people were obsessed about laws. This is simply not the case. Rather, the commandments are seen as God's desire for the community he has chosen, rescued, and blessed. The people of the covenant kept the laws not primarily to avoid God's anger but rather to show gratitude for what God had done for them. They did not consider the Law of Moses to be a burden but a gift from God. It is a concrete manifestation of the special relationship that YHWH initiated with their community; their faithfulness in obedience to the Law is their grateful response.

Ritual Enactment of the Covenant

Covenants were often sealed or renewed with a **sacrifice**. Animal and vegetable sacrifice was widespread among ancient peoples. A sacrifice was a gift given to God or other spiritual beings, with the understanding that valuable things could be transferred from this world to the spirit world. They thought fire was an appropriate medium for such exchange, since it is capable of turning solid, material things into a substance which the deity could receive and even partake. For example, Judges 13:19-23 describes how Manoah, who later became the father of Samson, made a burnt offering to God. As the fire leapt up into the air, he saw an angel ascending in the flame of the altar, which he understood to be a sign of God's acceptance of the offering. Israelites considered whole burnt offerings to be the best because the entire animal was consumed in the fire and, as the smoke went up into the heavens, the sweet odor would attract God's attention, and God would be pleased.

Ancient worshipers transferred gifts to the spiritual world in order to develop and maintain a relationship with God and spiritual beings. While to some such a sacrifice or gift may take on the appearance of bribery, at its best this giving was an attempt to build and maintain a relationship of caring and trust. People showed their good dispositions to God by offering things of value in the confidence that God, who is good by nature and is now well disposed to them, would meet their needs. They also offered sacrifice in order to show their appreciation for God's free gifts to them by giving God gifts in return.

If one were to create or confirm such a relationship, one must not be cheap or deceitful in one's gifts. The offerings must be "spotless," of good quality, such as one might offer to people of influence in human affairs. "First things" were especially valuable (firstborn animals, the first armful of harvested grain) because the "first" symbolized and stood for the whole. When one offered the "first things," one was symbolically offering everything to God. An extreme example of the importance of offering something of value is Abraham's near-sacrifice of Isaac in Genesis 22. Although YHWH is the one who commanded this sacrifice, Abraham's compliance with the command showed his willingness to risk everything for God, because, if this sacrifice had been carried out, everything Abraham had been living for would have been destroyed. Fortunately, once Abraham showed YHWH that he was willing to carry it out, YHWH proposed an alternative sacrifice.

Exodus 24 describes the ritual sealing of the Mosaic covenant. Animals were sacrificed and their blood collected. Half of the blood was thrown on the altar. Then the Law was read and the people answered, "All the words that the LORD has spoken we will do" (Exod 24:4). Finally, the other half of the blood was sprinkled on the people while Moses said: "See the blood of the covenant that the LORD has made with you in accordance with all these words" (Exod 24:8). The New Testament refers back to this covenant and its ritual enactment when it describes Jesus at the Last Supper—a meal closely connected with the Jewish Passover—taking bread and wine, sharing them with the disciples, and saying:

This is my body, which will be given for you; do this in memory of me . . . This cup that is poured out for you is the new covenant in my blood. (Luke 22:19–20)

Christians believe that Jesus, in his sacrifice on the cross, offered his life on behalf of humans, and in this offering he became the sacrifice of the new covenant. He asked humans to offer their lives to God in the act of faith by which they are justified.

Key Terms

legend	Isaac	Exodus
covenant	Jacob	prophets
Abraham	Israel	Aaron
patriarch	Joseph	Passover
Ishmael	Moses	sacrifice

Questions for Reading

1. Describe YHWH's promises to Abraham. What is the significance of those promises to the salvation history of the Israelite people?
2. What is a covenant? Describe God's covenant with Abraham and explain how it is similar to or different from the covenant with Moses.
3. What do the Genesis stories reveal about the way in which Abraham is a model of faith?
4. Describe the significance of the Ten Commandments, especially their relationship to the covenant that God made with Moses and the descendants of Jacob.

5. Explain how the ten plagues of the Exodus were, in effect, a contest between YHWH and the Egyptian gods. What role was played by Moses and Aaron, the Egyptian magicians, and the pharaoh?
6. What do the Exodus stories reveal about the nature of God and God's relationship with the Israelite people?
7. Why did ancient peoples offer sacrifices to God or the gods? Why were sacrifices killed or burned up? How do modern people accomplish the same task?

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