

7. How does the phrase “the elder shall serve the younger” describe a subplot of Scripture?

**Recommended Verses to Memorize**

Genesis 12:1–3

John 3:16

LESSON FIVE

## Moses and the Israelites

There was a person named Israel *before* there was a nation called Israel. (The nation is named after the man.) Abraham was the father of Isaac, and Isaac was the father of Jacob. Jacob was renamed Israel (see Genesis 35:10). Israel had twelve sons, and these twelve sons became the fathers of twelve tribes, the twelve tribes of Israel. Then tragedy struck: These twelve tribes became slaves in Egypt.

### God's Firstborn Son

Genesis reveals that salvation history is the story of God's family. God creates Adam as his firstborn son of creation. Though Adam sins, God the Father does not give up on humanity. God promises to restore humanity through Abraham.

The families in Genesis become nations. God calls Abraham's descendants—the nation of Israel—to be his “firstborn son” among the nations. Tragically, like Adam, Israel fails to realize its calling to be a faithful firstborn son. All is not lost, however: God stoops down to Israel's level as a good father, hoping to raise the nation from its sin to a restored relationship with him.

In Genesis God warns Abraham that his descendants will end up in slavery; however, he promises to deliver them from bondage and return them to the Promised Land (see Genesis 15:13–16, 18). Exodus tells us how God fulfills his covenant promises.

Although Israel is in servitude in Egypt, God wants to do more than just give the nation *political liberation*. The Scriptures show us that the Israelites were actually in the worst kind of bondage: They were in *spiritual* bondage! The Book of Ezekiel tells us that the Israelites begin worshiping the gods of Egypt before the Exodus (see Ezekiel 20:6–9). Thus, the goal of the Exodus is more than political independence: It is to call Israel out of Egypt to worship the Lord. God tells Moses to say on his behalf to Pharaoh, “Let my people go, that they may serve me in the wilderness” (Exodus 7:16). God wants to deliver Israel from

serving and worshiping the gods of Egypt so that they can serve and worship him, the *true* God!

### The Call of Moses

Fearing the growing Hebrew population, Pharaoh orders the slaughter of all the male Hebrew children (see Exodus 1:8, 15–22). One mother is able to save her child from death by placing him in a basket in the reeds at the edge of the Nile River. One of Pharaoh's daughters finds the child in the water, and she takes him into her home and raises him as her own son. She names the child "Moses," which means "taken from water" (Exodus 2:1–10).

Forty years later Moses sees an Egyptian taskmaster beating one of his fellow Hebrews. Moses intervenes and kills the taskmaster. Then he has to flee into the desert, a wanted man. He eventually settles down with a Midianite family and becomes a shepherd (see Exodus 2:11–25).

Forty years later, while he is tending his flock one day, Moses spots a burning bush whose flames seem inextinguishable. When he approaches the bush, God calls to him. The Lord identifies himself as the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. He tells Moses that he has heard the cry of his enslaved people, and he promises to deliver them and bring them to the Promised Land (see Exodus 3:2, 6–8).

God relates his plan to Moses: Moses is to ask Pharaoh to let Israel go on a three-day journey into the wilderness to sacrifice to the Lord. God tells Moses that Pharaoh will harden his heart and refuse Moses' request. Because of this, God will bring judgment on the Egyptians. He will lead the Israelites out of bondage and bring them into the Promised Land (see Exodus 3:18–20).

God calls Israel his "firstborn son" among the nations. When Pharaoh refuses to release God's firstborn son, the Lord will slay Pharaoh's firstborn son (see Exodus 4:22–23).

### Deliverance From Egypt

Many people wonder why God asks the Israelites to sacrifice animals like cattle, sheep and goats. It is not because God enjoys the smell of burning meat.

Moses explains to Pharaoh why the Israelites must be allowed to go out to the desert to offer their sacrifices to the Lord: Their sacrifices would be "abom-

inable" to the Egyptians (see Exodus 8:25–27). What is so offensive about Israel's sacrifices?

Israel is to sacrifice to God the very animals that the Egyptians worship as gods. God wants Israel to renounce the gods of Egypt and to worship him as the one true God. God wants them to serve him and *only* him!

When Pharaoh refuses to let the people go, God responds by sending ten famous plagues to Egypt. These plagues symbolize judgment on the gods of Egypt. Here are a few examples: In turning the Nile to blood, God symbolizes his victory over the Egyptian god Hapi, who governs the Nile (see Exodus 7:14–25). With the plague of frogs, the frog goddess Heket is mocked (see Exodus 8:1–15). The bull gods Apis and Hathor are judged in the destruction of cattle (see Exodus 9:1–7). With the plague of darkness, the sun god Re is defeated (see Exodus 10:21–23).

Even after nine plagues, however, Pharaoh still refuses to release God's firstborn son, Israel. Because of this insubordination, God threatens the firstborn sons of the Egyptians. The Lord tells Moses that he will send his angel of death to slay the firstborn sons in Egypt and the firstborn male offspring of all livestock (see Exodus 11:4–9). And God gives Israel a way to save their firstborn sons: the Passover (see Exodus 12:1–27).

The Israelites are instructed to *sacrifice* unblemished lambs, *spread* the blood over their doorposts and *eat* the lambs as part of a sacred meal (see Exodus 12:5–11). By slaying these animals God symbolically slaughters the gods of Egypt: "On all the gods of Egypt I will execute judgment" (Exodus 12:12). All of the Israelites who obey are "passed over," and their firstborn sons are spared (see Exodus 12:13).

The death of his firstborn son is the event that finally breaks Pharaoh (see Exodus 12:30–32), and he drives the people of Israel out of the land. God appears before Israel as a pillar of cloud by day and a pillar of fire by night. He leads his people out of Egypt and through the Red Sea (see Exodus 13:21; see 14–15).

Even when the Israelites doubt God and complain against him, the Lord cares for his people. The people grow weary of the difficult journey, and they begin to grumble against Moses and the Lord. They complain that they are *hungry*, and the Lord sends miraculous bread from heaven to feed them (see Exodus 16). Then they protest that there is no *water*, so the Lord gives them miraculous water from a rock (see Exodus 17).



Saint Paul explains that this foreshadows the new covenant: Just as the Holy Spirit led Israel through the Red Sea under Moses, so we are baptized into Christ and the Spirit in the baptismal waters. Furthermore, Moses gave the people heavenly bread and supernatural drink; Jesus gives us the Eucharist (see 1 Corinthians 10:1–4).

When the Israelites enter the desert, their major issue is trust: Will the people trust God to provide for their needs? Will they be content with God's provision (see Genesis 22:8, 14)? Or will they murmur against God, assuming he will not provide?

### The First Covenant With Israel

The Lord brings his people to Mount Sinai. Here he declares they are a "kingdom of priests and a holy nation" (Exodus 19:6). He gives Israel the Ten Commandments (see Exodus 20:1–17; 32:16). In addition he gives them civil laws, telling them how to deal with certain criminal actions (see Exodus 21–23).

Moses builds an altar with twelve pillars, symbolizing that all twelve tribes will enter into the covenant. Then Israel offers sacrifice to God. The people swear: "All that the LORD has spoken we will do, and we will be obedient" (Exodus 24:7; see also verse 3). Moses calls the blood of the sacrificed animals "the blood of the covenant which the LORD has made with you" (Exodus 24:8). The covenant is ratified with a meal when Moses and the elders eat in the presence of God (see Exodus 24:9–11).

God's covenant directions climax when Moses ascends the mountain of the Lord and stays there for forty days and forty nights (see Exodus 24:15–18). There he receives a vision of a heavenly pattern for the tent of worship, the mobile temple (see Exodus 25:9). Ancient Israelites understood this to mean that Moses saw the heavenly temple, of which the earthly tent and temple were a copy. The Book of Hebrews tells us that those who serve in the earthly temple "serve a copy and shadow of the heavenly sanctuary" (Hebrews 8:5).

The prophets also have visions of the heavenly temple. Isaiah is caught up to the heavenly throne room, where he sees the cherubim before the Lord (see Isaiah 6). It is the apostle John, however, who provides the fullest description of the heavenly Jerusalem in the Apocalypse (see Revelation 21–22). He says, "I

saw no temple in the city, for its temple is the Lord God the Almighty and the Lamb" (Revelation 21:22).

We see that God's purpose in delivering Israel was to give them his *law* and to bring them into his presence through *worship*. God wants to teach Israel and to have them enter into communion with him.

### God's Second Covenant With Israel

Tragically, while Moses is up on the mountain, Israel reverts to the idolatrous practices of the Egyptians. The people construct an image of the Egyptian god Apis, a bull god (see Exodus 32:1–6). Though God brings Israel out of Egypt, taking Egypt out of Israel proves more difficult.

In worshipping the golden calf, Israel succumbs to three major temptations: money, sex and power. First, the people surrender to the idol of *wealth* by worshipping the *golden* calf. Second, the worship of Apis involves *sexual immorality* (see Exodus 32:6, 25). Finally, the bull-god represents *virility, power* and *strength*.

When Israel breaks the covenant, the nation deserves the covenant curse of death. Speaking to Moses, God does not refer to Israel as "*my* people" but as "*your* people, whom *you* brought up out of the land of Egypt" (Exodus 32:7; see 3:10, 5:1, 6:7). God tells Moses, "Let me alone, that my wrath may burn hot against them and I may consume them" (Exodus 32:10).

Moses, however, reminds God of his oath to Abraham. If God destroys the Israelites, he will be killing Abraham's chosen descendants. That would break his promise to bless all the nations through them (see Exodus 32:13).

God has not forgotten his oath. He wants Moses to realize why he swore it to Abraham: He knew that Israel would need it! God programmed the covenant with merciful provisions that he knew the people would need.

Moses comes down from the mountain and, upon seeing the idolatry of Israel, smashes the tablets of the Ten Commandments (see Exodus 32:15–19). This symbolizes what Israel has done: The people have broken their covenant with the Lord. Then Moses shouts, "Who is on the Lord's side?"

The Levites respond, and Moses instructs them to kill the idolaters. Three thousand Israelites die because of their idolatry that day (see Exodus 32:26–28). Moses then tells the Levites, "Today you have ordained yourselves for the



service of the LORD, each one at the cost of his son and of his brother, that he may bestow a blessing upon you this day" (Exodus 32:29).

Now the covenant law changes. Israel has revealed its spiritual bondage to the gods of Egypt. To help purify the people of their idolatrous tendencies, God gives Moses an elaborate code of ritual purity laws, recounted in the Book of Leviticus. These laws are designed, in part, to quarantine Israel from the gentiles and their practices. These purity laws imply that Israel is not yet holy enough to go out and evangelize the nations. The people must first learn humility.

Moreover, God gives exhaustive instructions for continual animal sacrifice. Since the Israelites worshiped a golden calf, they must regularly sacrifice calves, sheep and goats, renouncing the gods of Egypt.

Prior to their sin Israel was called "a kingdom of priests" (Exodus 19:6). Now the Levites alone shall serve as priests. Thus the Book of Leviticus explains to the Levites the purity laws of the priests (see Leviticus 1—16) and the laws they are to teach the people to make them holy (see Leviticus 17—26).

### Rebellions and Rules

The Israelites continue to rebel. The Book of Numbers presents a pattern throughout its pages: Israel sins, and God gives Israel more laws. The laws are a means to teach Israel to acknowledge her weakness and turn to the Lord (see Galatians 3:19).

When the Israelites finally arrive at the border of the land promised to them, they refuse to enter into it. They fear those who inhabit the land, even though the Lord has promised them the land and victory over those who dwell in it (see Numbers 13:30—14:10).

By rejecting the Lord, the Israelites prove that they are beyond rehabilitation. The Lord promises that the current generation—except for Joshua and Caleb—will never enter the land. They will wander the desert until they die. The Lord will bring the next generation into the land (see Numbers 14:20—35).

Sadly, however, forty years later the next generation proves to be no less wicked. They fall into the same sin of idolatry, just as their fathers did before them, to Ba'al at Peor (see Numbers 25).

*Deuteronomy* means "second law"; due to their sinfulness God gives Israel a "lower law." Deuteronomy, therefore, is not promulgated in the words of God

but in the words of Moses. The book makes concessions, such as permitting divorce and genocidal warfare, that are absent in previous covenant legislations. According to Jesus, Moses gives these lower laws to Israel due to the hardness of their heart (see Ezekiel 20:25; Matthew 19:8).

The fathers of the Church recognized this "divine condescension" as an example of how our heavenly Father stoops down to the level of his children. Saint Paul calls the Law "our custodian until Christ came, that we might be justified by faith" (Galatians 3:24). The Deuteronomic Law was meant to teach Israel how to "grow up" in holiness. When Christ comes, however, these Deuteronomic law codes are no longer necessary. "Now that faith has come, we are no longer under a custodian" (Galatians 3:25).

The Book of Deuteronomy also recounts the instructions that Moses gives Israel for reconquering the land promised to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. The conditions of the Deuteronomic covenant will be fulfilled when the Lord gives Israel "rest from all your enemies round about" (Deuteronomy 12:10). At that time the Lord will show Israel where they are to build the temple (see Deuteronomy 12:11). In other words, the goal of Deuteronomy, just like the Book of Exodus, concerns liturgy and worship, not just political independence. God wants Israel to worship him, and once the instructions of Deuteronomy are fulfilled, the nation will worship in a temple.

### Jesus as the New Moses

The person and work of Jesus is foreshadowed in Moses and the events of Israel's Passover and Exodus. Like Moses, Jesus is born during the reign of a ruthless king who kills other Hebrew male children. Like Israel, Jesus sojourns in Egypt and is called back to his birthplace after a period of exile. He passes through waters—his baptism in the Jordan—and goes out into the wilderness, where he is tested by a forty-day fast.

Jesus' first miracle is turning water into wine, and he later turns wine into blood, recalling the first plague of Exodus. He teaches from a mountain, just as Moses' teaching issued from his visitation on a mountain. Jesus' appearance on a mountain before three companions radiates God's glory, just as Moses' face shone on his descent from the mountain after speaking with God (see Exodus 34:29—35). Jesus gives heavenly bread and spiritual drink to God's people (the Eucharist), as foreshadowed by the manna in the desert. He appoints a set of

twelve leaders (the apostles) and then an additional set of seventy disciples, just as Moses appointed judges to help him govern Israel in the desert (see Matthew 10:1; Exodus 18:13–24). Jesus is the true Passover Lamb, and he leads us out of spiritual bondage in the New Exodus.

Thus God uses the historical events in the Old Testament to prefigure the salvation Christ brings in the New. Through Israel's Passover God delivers the nation from the bondage of slavery and leads them to the Promised Land. In the New Passover Christ delivers us from the bondage of sin and leads us to the heavenly Jerusalem, the true Promised Land.

Furthermore, Israel's Passover prefigures the paschal mystery of the new covenant. In Israel's Passover a lamb is sacrificed, its blood is shed, and it is eaten as part of a family meal. In the true Passover Christ is offered as the sacrificial Lamb of God; his blood is shed for the salvation of the world. Just as the Israelites had to eat the lamb, so the Church feeds upon the Body and Blood of Christ in the Eucharist. The Lamb has been sacrificed; now we must partake of the meal (see 1 Corinthians 5:7–8). In fact, Christ's words at the Last Supper evoke the covenant ratification ceremony at Sinai (see Matthew 26:27; Exodus 24:1–8).

So far we've seen how God has expanded his covenant family from a marriage, to a household, to a tribe, to twelve tribes. Under Moses God's covenant people have grown into a nation. In the next lesson we will see the climax of God's Old Testament plan: the kingdom.

### Review Questions for Personal Study

1. How does the Book of Exodus show us that the Israelites were in not only political but also spiritual bondage?
2. In what way does the Book of Exodus show us God's judgment on the gods of the Egyptians?
3. Why did God instruct Israel to offer animal sacrifices?
4. How are God's instructions for regular animal sacrifice related to the first question above?
5. What was the goal of the Exodus?

6. How does Moses prefigure the person and work of Christ?
7. How is the Eucharist the New Passover?

### Recommended Verses to Memorize

1 Corinthians 5:7–8