

## An Introduction to Exodus

### **Who?**

Imagine yourself as the editor of the Pentateuch, the first five books of the Bible, pulling together a document from a variety of different sources, during the period of Israel's exile in Babylon. What are you trying to say? What can be included and what can be left out?

As we discussed when we looked at Genesis, the original author of Exodus is probably impossible to locate. Tradition says Moses wrote the book, but both the estimated dates of the sources and the competing voices within the text make this highly unlikely. What we appear to have is a text brought into being by an editor, one who has interwoven a number of source materials with a degree of complexity and skill, whilst at the same time keeping in some inconsistencies that arise from combining sources that have their own agendas. These inconsistencies need not detract from the text, however, but create a dialectic tension within it from which the reader can draw their own synthesis.

### **When?**

Location-wise, Exodus begins where Genesis ended – in Egypt. However, whereas the first book of the Bible leaves the family of Jacob in a foreign land, Exodus starts with news that that family has now become a nation, 'fruitful and prolific'. This is an early indication of the subject matter of the book. Genesis began with the formation of the whole world. Exodus begins with the formation – albeit in captivity – of a nation.

Let's go back to our exiled editor in Babylon. Clearly, what it means to be a nation would be important to him, especially if we consider that those things which had been taken for granted have now disappeared. Unifying factors, like the monarchy and the Temple in Jerusalem, have gone and so the editor wants to find material which performs the roles of king and religion when they themselves are absent.

Parts of the book of Exodus are very old. Two significant differences between the laws in Exodus and Deuteronomy are worth pointing out at this point. Exodus, unlike Deuteronomy, makes no mention of laws for the installation of a king in Israel; also, in Exodus 20, the people are told that they may offer sacrifices to God wherever they

build an altar. This is contradicted in Deuteronomy, when it is stated that only one altar should be used for sacrifices.

These two differences suggest that the sources used in Exodus are earlier than those used in Deuteronomy. It places them prior to the centralising of the religion of Israel, which took place in the 7<sup>th</sup> century BC, and perhaps even places some of the material prior to the monarchy in the 10<sup>th</sup> Century.

### **Why?**

The editor of the Pentateuch sources this old material in order to answer the questions: 'who are we?' and 'what is it that binds us together?' In the story of the exodus, Israel finds something that unites the nation; in the person of Moses, Israel finds a hero who rescued them from captivity in Egypt; in the laws that God gives to Moses on Mount Sinai, Israel finds a set of rules that will keep them distinct from the Babylonians amongst whom they are now living.

Exodus tells the Israelites who they are, but it also tells them who God is, and this is perhaps our way into the book today. God saw the suffering of the people and acted, not because Israel deserved it, but because God is gracious; God took on the might of pharaoh – perceived by the Egyptians as a deity – and defeated him, so whilst there is grace in God, there is also genuine power. Finally, God is the source of the law; there is an authority which is above both humankind and nature, to whom people may appeal. In the book of Exodus, the characters of both God and Israel are defined.