

# HOW TO READ EXODUS

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READING EXODUS  
WITH A STRATEGY



**T**oday Christians typically pay more attention to Genesis than to Exodus. A partial explanation for this situation can be found in the incredible focus often paid to the question of creation, which has fed a “culture war” between those who believe God created the world and those who don’t. Another contributing factor is simply the fact that Genesis is the first book in the canon (the body of writings the church recognizes as the standard of its faith and its practice).

Without a doubt, Genesis is an important book, providing the foundation to much that follows. It deserves close study. That said, in its ancient context it is the preface to the book of Exodus. To be more exact, we must remember that the first five books of the Bible (Genesis through

Deuteronomy) are really a single literary whole that goes by various names: The Book of Moses, the Torah and the Pentateuch. Genesis is the introduction to the real focus of the Torah, the founding of Israel as a nation. Thus, the book of Exodus assumes tremendous significance as it describes how Israel escaped its captivity in Egypt, received the law that defined it as a nation, and built a central worship site, the Tabernacle. Genesis provides a background to prepare the reader for hearing the story of the Exodus.

*How to Read Exodus* gives a roadmap for interpreting this important book. It is the fourth book in a series that includes *How to Read Psalms*, *How to Read Proverbs* and *How to Read Genesis*. These are not commentaries on the books, but guides to interpretive strategies. Even so, *How to Read Exodus* chapters seven through nine will provide an overview of the contents of the book in the light of the background provided in the other chapters. In chapters ten through twelve, we will explore the continuing impact that the book of Exodus has on subsequent biblical revelation, both in the Old and the New Testament.

The next, introductory chapter will provide an overview of interpretive principles that are important for the study of Exodus. These principles will sound familiar to those who have read my previous book on Genesis. Genesis and Exodus are similar in genre (compared to Psalms and Proverbs, the other books treated thus far in this series), and so many of the ideas in chapter one of *How to Read Genesis* will be repeated here. However, the examples will come from Exodus rather than from Genesis. For those who have already read *How to Read Genesis*, reading the next chapter will provide helpful review and preparation for the rest of the book.

## WHAT IS THE PURPOSE OF INTERPRETATION ANYWAY?

In our modern/postmodern world, people have divergent views of the purpose of interpretation. The question of the purpose of interpretation is integrally related to the issue of the location of the meaning of a text. It makes a world of difference whether one believes that the meaning of

a text is identified with the intended message of the author or not.

Most readers assume that their interpretation of a text replicates the meaning of the author. Contemporary literary theory, however, has questioned whether such a goal is even possible.<sup>1</sup> After all, readers typically do not have direct access to authors, but rather are restricted to the words on the page. How can we know for sure that our understanding of the text faithfully reproduces that of the author? Indeed, even if the author was present and we could ask him or her questions, we may still have problems. Perhaps authors wrote better than they knew or have forgotten what they meant by their words.

Of course, with the book of Exodus such problems are deeply compounded. In the first place, the author is dead. In the second place, since Exodus is an anonymous composition we cannot be absolutely certain who wrote different parts of the book. Even if we end up agreeing with the traditional authorship ascription to Moses, we cannot believe he wrote every word of it (see appendix 1). But even granting Moses wrote the entirety of Exodus, those of us who believe in the divine inspiration of the book have yet a further complication. When we talk about the author's intention, are we referring to the human or the divine author's intention? Some try to guard against this problem by insisting that the human author was fully conscious of the divine intention in the writing.<sup>2</sup> However, the New Testament claims that the prophets spoke better than they knew (1 Pet 1:10-12), and we would be very hard pressed to believe that the human authors of the Old Testament would have known all the interpretive meaning that the New Testament authors recognized in their writings (as when Matthew cites the exodus tradition of Hosea 11; see chapter 9).<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>See Tremper Longman III, "Literary Approaches to Biblical Interpretation," in *Foundations of Contemporary Interpretation*, ed. Moisés Silva (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996), pp. 103-23. See also D. Firth and J. Grant, eds., *Words and the Word: Explorations in Biblical Interpretation and Literary Theory* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 2008).

<sup>2</sup>See Walter Kaiser, "The Meaning of Meaning," in *An Introduction to Biblical Hermeneutics*, by Walter Kaiser and Moisés Silva (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994), pp. 27-44.

<sup>3</sup>See the helpful discussion of New Testament quotations of Old Testament texts in Peter Enns, *Inspiration and Incarnation: Evangelicals and the Problem of the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2005), pp. 113-66.

Such issues lead many readers to abandon the language of authorial intention and move to a text-based interpretive method. They feel more comfortable talking in terms of what the text says as opposed to what an author meant by a particular passage. Such a strategy helpfully concentrates focus on the literary conventions of the text, particularly genre (see below). On the other hand, study of the text does not have to result in the abandonment of the goal of discovering the author's intention. While reminding us that our only access to the author's mind is through the text, we can still speak in terms of discovering the author's intention in the literary conventions of the text, or at least make a hypothesis about the author's meaning.

Finally, some interpreters go so far as to completely deny that a literary/biblical text has a determinate meaning.<sup>4</sup> A passage only means what the reader says that it means. In reaction to this idea, we should not ignore the fact that readers play a major role in the specific interpretation of a text. Readers approach a text with certain lenses formed by their gender and their economic, ethnic and theological background.<sup>5</sup> We are finite beings that cannot fully grasp the meaning of a text as rich as Exodus. The involvement of the reader in the interpretation of the text is also enhanced when we realize that interpretation should be understood as more than what the text meant to the original audience but what it means to us today.

Again, we should affirm the role of the reader in the determination of the meaning. We should accordingly expand our interpretation and correct its distortions by reading with a community of readers who will attend to different aspects of the text. Even so, some reader-response critics understand the reader's role even more radically. They do not allow their interpretation to be shaped by the text at all. Indeed, some (deconstructionists) exert their "interpretive" energy to undermine the

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<sup>4</sup>See D. J. A. Clines, "A World Established on Water (Psalm 24): Reader-Response, Deconstruction, and Bespoke Criticism," in *The New Literary Criticism and the Hebrew Bible*, ed. J. C. Exum and D. J. A. Clines (JSOTSup 143; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1993), pp. 79-90.

<sup>5</sup>See Tremper Longman III, *Reading the Bible with Heart and Mind* (Colorado Springs, Colo.: NavPress, 1997), pp. 61-68.

idea that the text communicates any meaning at all.

In the final analysis, the best understanding of the purpose of interpretation is to understand that our goal is to rediscover the message of the author. We do so tempered by the understanding that we have access to the author only through the text, so to understand the text of Exodus, we should study the conventions of Hebrew narrative and law. Our reading should also be humbled by recognition that our final interpretation is a hypothesis about the author's meaning.<sup>6</sup> The most important parts of an author's message are said so often and in so many different ways that it is hard to misconstrue them (unless one is a purposefully mischievous reader). However, not everything in the text is equally important and interpreters must exercise humility in the way in which they present their interpretive conclusions.

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<sup>6</sup>G. Strickland, *Structuralism or Criticism? Thoughts on How We Read* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981).