

CHAPTER 5

Exodus

THINGS TO THINK ABOUT

The story of the Exodus is of fundamental significance in the Jewish faith. According to Scripture, God freed the Jews from Egyptian bondage, guided them in the desert and led them to the Promised Land. Every year this event is celebrated at Passover (see Chapter 79). Through the centuries, the Exodus has served as a symbol of liberation and freedom. Yet, modern scholars have raised serious questions about the historicity of this event. From a geographical standpoint, the Biblical account seems implausible: the Bible does not provide a persuasive picture of the route taken by the ancient Hebrews. Further, there are difficulties in attempting to fix a date to the Exodus. Hence, you should consider whether there is any truth in the claim that the Jews were freed by Moses as Scripture relates.

If this narrative has no basis in historical fact, there are serious implications for Judaism as a religious system. As we will see, the Biblical account of the Exodus has shaped Jewish consciousness through the ages. Traditionally Jews have believed that they are God's chosen people (see Chapter 66), and that their destiny is bound up with God's purposes (see Chapter 70 and 71). However, if there is no historical foundation to the events depicted in the Book of Exodus, what sense is there in these claims? If God did not in fact send Moses to persuade Pharaoh to free the Hebrews from slavery, why should Jews believe that God providentially watches over his people and will redeem them at the end of time?

THINGS TO DO

- Look at the map of the Exodus. Compare it with the Biblical account. See if you can trace the route of the ancient Hebrews.
- Go to Google. Click on images. Type in words connected with the Exodus account such as 'Moses', 'pharaoh', 'Egypt plagues'. Look for websites dealing with the Exodus such as <www.aish.com>.
- Go to Amazon.com. Type in 'Exodus and Bible'. Have a look at books dealing with the Biblical account of the Exodus. You should look at books that explain the traditional Jewish viewpoint as well as modern scholarly works.
- Get a traditional Passover *Haggadah*. See how the Jewish people celebrate the Exodus account during Passover.

TIPS FOR TEACHERS

- Have a debate about the historicity of the Exodus account in the Bible. One side should argue that the Exodus occurred as depicted in Scripture; the other side should refute these claims on the basis of modern Biblical scholarship.
- Stage a Passover *seder* for your class. You will need to photocopy sections of the Passover *Haggadah* for all the members of the class. Be sure to have all the essential elements for the *seder* (see Chapter 79).

- Arrange for your class to attend a community *seder* at a local synagogue.
- Explain the theological and moral problems connected with the Biblical claim that God sent a series of plagues to persuade the pharaoh to free the captive Hebrews. Divide the class into groups to explore this issue. Reconvene the class for a general discussion.
- Ask your class to write a short critical essay about the Biblical conviction that God is on the side of the oppressed and exploited. This has been the view of modern liberation theologians – you might want to photocopy passages from these works for them to consider. To find books by leading liberation theologians, go to Amazon.com and type in ‘liberation theology’.
- Ask your class if the Ten Commandments are relevant in the modern world. Divide the class into small groups and tell them to write down arguments for and against the continued significance of each of these laws. Reconvene the group for a discussion.