

## OUT OF EGYPT (Exodus 1-18)

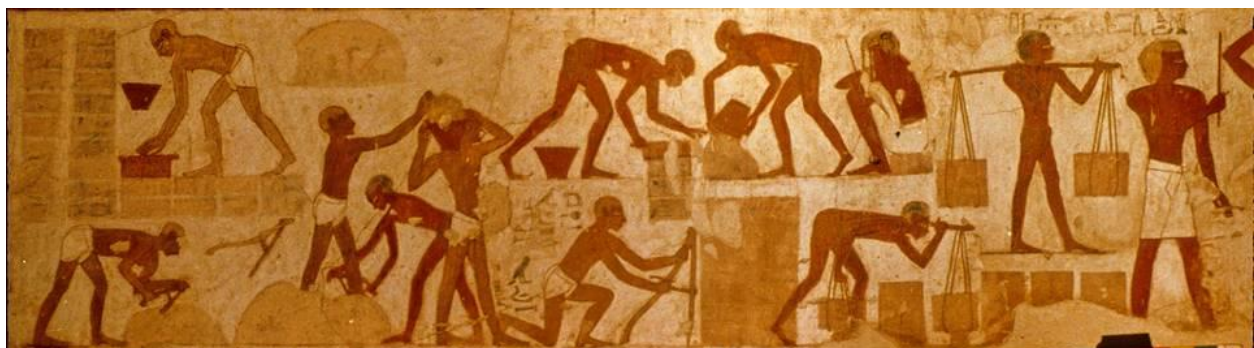
The remaining four books of Torah describe the primary redemptive event of the Old Testament, the exodus from Egypt. In the pre-history of the nation, the Book of Genesis describes how the 70 members of Jacob's family migrated to Egypt to survive a terrible famine (Ex. 1:1-5). The promises of God to Abraham and his family, however, were inextricably bound up with the land of Canaan. God had informed Abraham about his family's future residency in Egypt, but he also spoke of their eventual ownership of the entire land of Canaan (Gen. 15:13-16). Sometime after Joseph's death, a new regime rose to power in Egypt which was not favorable toward the family of Jacob (Ex. 1:6-14). Jacob's descendants were reduced to abject slavery in the government building projects. It is in the context of this slavery that God's redemptive work for the nation began. Though many personalities figure in the event of the exodus, Moses towers above the rest as the leader whom God chose to lead his people out of bondage.

### THE PHARAOH WHO DID NOT KNOW JOSEPH (1:8)

*In all likelihood, it was the 18<sup>th</sup> Dynasty of native Egyptians who “did not know Joseph” or his family (whereas the previous rulers had been favorable). The pharaohs of “The New Kingdom” began with Ahmose.*

*The Hyksos (= “Foreigners”), the former rulers, had gradually gained power over all Egypt by the 17<sup>th</sup> century BC and relocated the capital to the East Delta. Naturally, the Hyksos, themselves Semites, would have been more favorable to other Semites, like Jacob's family.*

*Not trusting aliens after the Hyksos' Period, the new dynasty of native Egyptian rulers did their best to erase the influence and memory of the Hyksos. The Pharaohs of the 18<sup>th</sup> Dynasty would have been those most likely to have enslaved Semites who still lived in Egypt.*



*Canaanite and Nubian brick-makers are identifiable in this Egyptian tomb painting from the 15 century BC.*

Because the exodus is the central redemptive event in the Old Testament, it carries with it not only historical value, but also paradigmatic value. The theme of the exodus carries through into the New Testament in the imagery of humans as slaves to sin (Jn. 8:31-34) and Jesus as the “second Moses” who leads them out (Lk. 9:30-31).<sup>1</sup> Various parts of the exodus story, including the contest between

<sup>1</sup> It is apparent in the Greek text that Jesus' “departure” parallels the story of the redemption from Egypt, since Luke deliberately chose the Greek word *exodos* (= departure) in this passage.

God and Pharaoh, the Passover, the giving of the law, and the construction of the tent of meeting have their New Testament counterparts in Satan's subjugation of humans (He. 2:14-15), the sacrifice of Jesus as God's Lamb (1 Co. 5:7), the new ethic of love and grace as the fulfillment of the law (Ro. 13:8-10), and the building of the Christian church (Ep. 2:19-22).

## The Themes of Exodus

### Liberation

- *The opening is primarily concerned with the transition from oppression to freedom.*
- *The author of this freedom is Yahweh.*

### Law

- *At Sinai, Yahweh announces his will for all aspects of Israel's public and private life.*
- *For Israel, all law is God's law.*

### Covenant

- *A binding relationship is established between God and Israel.*
- *This covenant envisions both judgment and hope.*

### Presence

- *God takes up residence in the midst of Israel in the tabernacle.*
- *The "glory of God" is both an abiding presence and traveling assurance.*

### Israel in Egypt (1-11)

The Greek word *exodos*, meaning "the way out," gives us the title of this second book in the Torah. The way out of Egypt for the descendants of Jacob begins with God's call to an Israelite named Moses.<sup>2</sup> Though born into a slave family, he was reared by an Egyptian princess (2:1-10). Because he killed an Egyptian slave-master, Moses fled to the desert, where he became a shepherd and married into a shepherd family (2:11-25). Here, at the age of 80, he was confronted by God at Mt. Sinai (also called Horeb). God appeared to him in a burning bush and called him to return to Egypt in order to lead the Israelites out of their bondage (3-4).

One of the most important things to occur in Moses' divine call was the revelation of God's personal name, Yahweh (3:13-15). While the general word for God (*El* or *Elohim*) was used throughout the various cultures of the ancient Near East, the special name Yahweh (translated "LORD" in the English versions) was unique to Israel. Thus, when the Israelites looked backward to the ancestral stories found in Genesis, they were to understand that the God who spoke to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob was this same Yahweh, who had intervened to deliver them from Egypt (3:16-17). The name Yahweh is based upon the Hebrew verb "to be," hence, the explanation "I am who I am" or "I will be who I will be."

If anything, Moses was a reluctant prophet. He offered to God a string of excuses why he should not return to Egypt (4:1, 10, 13), but in the end, he obeyed. God demonstrated that he would empower

<sup>2</sup> The Hebrew name *Moshe* means "to draw out," recalling the circumstances of his protection by the Egyptian princess. In Egyptian, the name means "to give birth to" and the root is found in the names of various Egyptian Pharaohs, such as, Ahmose, Thutmose, Amenmose, and Ramose.



*"Moses" by Michelangelo, Church of San Pietro in Vincoli, Rome*

after blow, Yahweh crushed the various Egyptian religious entities by sending plagues upon the land (7-12; cf. Nu. 33:3-4). The Egyptians worshiped gods and goddesses connected with the Nile, frogs, the sky, bulls and cows, the sun, and the realm of the dead. In the ten plagues, Yahweh demonstrated his divine sovereignty so that the Israelites knew, without doubt, that he, alone, was truly God (9:16).

Moses with miraculous signs, and he also sent along Moses' brother, Aaron, to assist him (4:14-17).

When Moses confronted Pharaoh with God's message to let the people leave, there ensued a divine contest. Pharaoh was the god-symbol of the state, while Moses was the spokesman for Yahweh. At stake was which deity had sovereign control, Yahweh or the deities of Egypt? In blow

#### THE PHARAOH OF THE EXODUS

*A frustration to modern readers is that the Pharaoh of the exodus is unnamed. He is simply called by his title "Pharaoh." This ambiguity, in turn, affects the date of the exodus, which has been vigorously debated, whether in the 15<sup>th</sup> century BC or the 13<sup>th</sup> century BC. The 15<sup>th</sup> century date, based primarily upon 1 Kg. 6:1 and taking the numbers in this passage as strictly mathematical, works out to 1446 BC. The 13<sup>th</sup> century date is based primarily on archeological evidence, taking the number 480 years in 1 Kg. 6:1 as a non-mathematical symbol of 12 generations. A set of correspondences between the Egyptian Pharaoh and several city-states in Canaan from the early 1300s BC suggest that the Israelites were not yet there. Most contemporary scholars opt for the 13<sup>th</sup> century date, putting the exodus in about 1250 BC. We do know, for instance, that the earliest mention of Israel in the land of Canaan outside the Bible is in the Merneptah Stele, which dates to 1210 BC. Still, the dating issue remains unresolved.*



*If the exodus date is 1446 BC, Thutmose III (1479-1425 BC) is most likely the Pharaoh of the exodus (left). If the exodus date is in the 13<sup>th</sup> century, Ramesses II (1279-1213 BC) is the most likely the Pharaoh of the exodus (middle). The Merneptah Stele (1210 BC) describes an Egyptian invasion of Canaan, and the Israelites are described as one of the people groups that were attacked (right).*



The Hebrew vocabulary in the accounts of the plagues reflects the idea that this was a terrific contest of wills between Yahweh, the true God, and Pharaoh, the god-symbol of Egypt. Thus, the plagues are called *maggephah* (= plague, torment), *nega'* (= assault, blow), *'oth* (= sign, mark), *mopheth* (= portent, omen) and *pele'* (= something extraordinary). The verb used is *nakah* (= to strike, to batter).

### First Plague (7:14-25)



LEFT: Osiris  
BELOW: Hapi



The first calamity consisted of three related events: 1) turning the Nile into blood, 2) infestation of frogs, and 3) infestation of "fasteners," translated variously as lice, gnats or mosquitos.

- This plague likely was directed at Khnum, creator of water and life; Hapi, the Nile god; and Osiris, whose bloodstream was believed to be the Nile.
- The various calamities may be ecologically linked: violent storms in the mountains of Ethiopia saturate the Nile with red clay, which then chokes the fish, which in turn are infected with anthrax causing the frogs to leave, after which they die. Lice and flies feed on the dead frogs, infecting the grass that in turn kills cattle and causes boils in humans.

This language of a divine contest helps to explain why Yahweh is described as "hardening Pharaoh's heart" (7:3, 13; 8:15). The hardening of Pharaoh's heart must be viewed against the background of the question, "Who is really God?" Yahweh will brook no rival from any other so-called deity. The hardening of Pharaoh's heart is a sign of Yahweh's sovereignty and demonstrates his power as the true God (10:1-2; cf. 14:4).



### The Final Plague is Announced (11)

The last plague, once again, would be against the patron deity of Pharaoh, the god Osiris.

- As the righteous judge and ruler of the land of the dead, he also was the god who granted all life.
- He was typically depicted with green skin and holding a crook and a flail.
- The threat of death to all the first-born was a direct challenge to Osiris.

### The Passover and the Journey to Mt. Sinai (12-18)

With the Passover plague, Pharaoh had no choice but to allow Moses and the people to leave (12:31-36). The eating of the lamb and the smearing of lamb's blood on the door frames of each home became the highest symbol of redemption for the Israelites.

Annually and ever after, they would celebrate their freedom of that night (12:1-30). Shortly, however, Pharaoh changed his mind and pursued the Israelites with the Egyptian army (14:5-9). Trapped between this army and a large body of water, the people cried out in despair (14:10-14). Here, Yahweh performed his climactic redemptive act, when he brought the people across the sea on dry ground and destroyed the Egyptian soldiers by drowning them in the sea (14:15--15:21).<sup>3</sup>

The miracles of the ten plagues and the miracle at the Red Sea were followed by other miracles of preservation. Bitter water was turned into sweet water (15:22-25), bread (manna) was given from the heavens each morning (16), water gushed from a rock when Moses struck it with his staff (17:1-7), and a desert enemy was soundly defeated (17:8-16). On their journey, Jethro, Moses' father-in-law, met them. His advice was for Moses to appoint administrators over the people in order to divide the responsibilities for oversight, a suggestion that Moses followed (18).

<sup>3</sup> The translation of *Yam Suph* (= Sea of Reeds) as "Red Sea" is based on the LXX and Latin Versions. The location is uncertain, but it was probably one of the bodies of water now comprising the Suez Canal.