

*Journey Through Exodus: The Church, Exile, and Covid-19*  
*A three-week study: January 3, 10, and 17 of 2021* Daniel Headrick

Why Exodus, and why *now*?

Exodus tells a story of delivery from bondage to a way of life that was killing the people of Israel. Enslaved by Pharaoh, deprived of dignity and worth, Israel was in danger both of literal extinction and an extinction of its way of life as a people of faith. Enter God, stage left. Yahweh, whose mysterious name is given in the third chapter to a felon on the run named Moses, acts decisively to deliver Israel from bondage.

The paradigmatic event of Exodus is commemorated in the Passover. In Exodus 12, just before the horrible and final plague of the killing of the firstborn is enacted, God instructs the people in a perpetual act of memory and instruction.

You shall observe this rite as a perpetual ordinance for you and your children. When you come to the land that the Lord will give you, as he has promised, you shall keep this observance. And when your children ask you, ‘What do you mean by this observance?’ you shall say, ‘It is the passover sacrifice to the Lord, for he passed over the houses of the Israelites in Egypt, when he struck down the Egyptians but spared our houses.’” And the people bowed down and worshiped. Exodus 12:24-27.

To remember, and to pass on. Perhaps that is the gift Exodus gives us as people of God. To remember how God has acted decisively to save us, and to pass on to the next generation the stories and values that emerged from such salvation.

To remember how God has saved us and how God is saving us today is a vital task for a church surrounded by a culture of amnesia and short attention span. What are our values as a people? What is the common ground that holds us together as a community? What do we want to pass on to our children? Exodus helps us have these conversations, which are vital in today’s era of anxious pandemic.

Before Covid struck, 3,500 churches were closing every year. That’s roughly 10 churches a day. Giving is down 40% for U.S. churches during Covid. We are

asking the survival question, the same we were asking before Covid, only now it is sharper and more defined.

We have not been able to embrace each other or gather together since March of 2020. We have been in literal exile. We are accustomed to hearing many say (and perhaps we have said) that we don't need a church building to worship God. The other day I passed a car with a bumper sticker which said something like "My church is nature."

Exodus tells the story of a God on the move. His tabernacle was designed to be portable because the people were on the move. Wherever God led, there the people went. Now that we cannot gather, where are the spaces we find God's presence?

Exodus helps us have a conversation about a way of life that is no longer working for us. At least for the near future, we will continue to be separated from one another. And so we are invited to have a conversation about what it means to be the people of God in exile, with a God who is on the move, during a terrifying plague, at a time when our stories and values may be uncertain, or forgotten.

In this first session, we look at unlikely leaders of the Exodus. Leaders like Shiphrah and Puah, Jochebed (Moses' mother), Zipporah (Moses' wife), Pharaoh's daughter, and Miriam (Moses' sister). Each of them acted in extraordinary brave ways in furtherance of values for the common good. They are good role models for the church.

Read Exodus 1:8-22 (Shiphrah and Puah); Exodus 2:1-10 (Moses' birth and Pharaoh's daughter); and Exodus 2:15-22 and 4:21-26 (story of Zipporah).

As you read over these texts, ponder these questions:

1. What do you hear God saying to you as you read these texts?
2. Are there any connections between their stories and our life?
3. Who are the unlikely heroes of your life? Have you ever acted boldly to do the "right thing" or seen someone else do so?

If you are interested, I provide some more detailed notes on these stories below.

## Notes on Exodus

Exodus means *exit*. We get the name from the Greek translation of the Hebrew Bible known as the Septuagint. The Exodus is widely thought to have occurred between the period of 1380-1200 BCE, in other words, approximately *three thousand years ago*. As civilizations rise and fall, the record and material artifacts surrounding those people groups inevitably fade and in many cases, are non-existent.

One material artifact does bear witness to the existence of a people known as “Israel” dating from the 13th century before Christ. It is the so-called Merneptah Stele, but it does little more than verify that something named Israel existed long ago. It records the death of Israel in a series of lines about an Egyptian king’s victories over foreign peoples:

*Israel is laid waste, his seed is not.*

It is the first source we have outside of the Bible which refers to the people of Israel. The second source from the 9th century says that “Israel has perished forever!” And yet, Israel survived.

The author of Exodus seems disinterested in the kind of particularity that we often demand of historical accounts. All the kings of Egypt in the text receive the same generic title: Pharaoh.

For reasons that are less than obvious, the Hebrew people had become a hated minority in the land of Egypt. A popular historical theory is that the Semitic people group known as the Hyksos had dominated Egypt for a generation. Perhaps the enslavement of the Hebrews was Egyptian ethnic revenge, what we would call “ethnic cleansing.”

The kind of slavery depicted in Exodus was different than the model we are perhaps more familiar with in antebellum America. It was forced labor: enslavement for particular building projects, specifically the supply cities of Pithom and Ramses. By some estimate, it took 24.5 million bricks to construct a pyramid. A slave might make four thousand bricks a day, at least according to the extraordinary quota we have from ancient records.

We are likely familiar with the story that Pharaoh commanded the Israelites to make “bricks without straw” as the story is told in Exodus 5. But, this has it wrong as Nahum Sarna explains:

The new directive did not demand “bricks without straw,” as the English saying goes. Rather, it ordered the brickmakers to collect their own straw; until then it had been supplied by the state. Chopped straw or stubble was a crucial ingredient in the manufacture of bricks. It was added to the mud from the Nile, then shaped in a mold and left to dry in the sun. The straw acted as a binder, and the acid released by the decay of the vegetable matter greatly enhanced the plastic and cohesive properties of the brick, thus preventing shrinking, cracking, and loss of shape.<sup>1</sup>

No wonder the Israelites could not finish this task. The Pharaoh was setting them up to fail in hopes that they would perish.

Seeing that “the more they were oppressed, the more they multiplied and spread” (Ex. 1:12), Pharaoh resorts to genocide. He commands the Hebrew midwives Shiphrah and Puah to kill any Hebrew male babies they encounter during their midwifery. A few notes about this story will aid in your appreciation:

- Shiphrah means “to be beautiful” and Puah means “the girl.”
- They are named while the Pharaoh is nameless. “In the biblical scale of values these lowly champions of morality assume far greater historic importance than do the all-powerful tyrants who ruled Egypt.”<sup>2</sup>
- The substance of the genocidal command is in verse 16: “When you act as midwives to the Hebrew women, and see them on the birthstool, if it is a boy, kill him; but if it is a girl, she shall live.” The English term “birthstool” conjures up some kind of stone surface for the woman to deliver the baby. However, it is likely a euphemism for testicles. The real meaning of the verse is more likely to be “When you help the Hebrew women to give birth, look at the genitals. If it is a boy, put him to death. If a girl, let her live.”<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Nahum M. Sarna, *Exodus* (The JPS Torah Commentary; Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1991), 28.

<sup>2</sup> Nahum M. Sarna, *Exodus* (The JPS Torah Commentary; Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1991), 7.

<sup>3</sup> Douglas K. Stuart, *Exodus* (vol. 2; The New American Commentary; Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 2006), 77–78.

- We are told that the midwives “feared” God in verse 17. We are not told they feared Pharaoh.
- The midwives are quick witted in verse 19, telling the apparently naïve Pharaoh that the reason they have failed in their task is that the Hebrew women deliver their babies quicker than Egyptian women. The babies had already arrived by the time the midwives had shown up, in this telling.
- Pharaoh orders that the male Hebrew babies be thrown into the Nile, which is an ironic foreshadowing of a time soon to come when the Egyptian “boys” of the Pharaoh’s army will drown in the Red Sea.

The story of Moses’ birth is one of our most beloved and familiar of biblical narratives. Here are additional notes that will aid in your interpretation:

- Moses’ mother is called the “woman” in chapter 2, but we know her name is Jochebed from Exodus 6:20, and we know his father’s name was Amram from the same verse.
- In the New Testament book of Hebrews, we are told that “By faith Moses’ parents hid him for three months after he was born, because they saw he was no ordinary child, and they were not afraid of the king’s edict.” (Hebrews 11:23).
- Upon Moses’ birth, his mother Jochebed sees that he is *tov*, Hebrew for *good*. This is what God says of creation in Genesis 1. Thus, a new creation is born.
- Moses is placed in a *tevah*, Hebrew for *ark*, much like Noah’s ark which represented salvation for humanity. In this ark, there is no way to steer the vessel. Moses is at the mercy of God.
- Moses’ name is from an Egyptian word for “to be born”. But the author of Exodus, in a folklore play on words, interprets his name to derive from the Hebrew word “to draw out from the water”. So the author is telling us that the Pharaoh’s daughter unwittingly named him something that foretells what he will later do, namely, draw the people of God out of the water.

- Moses' sister, presumably Miriam, acts shrewdly in verse 7. She does not disclose that the boy's mother Jochebed is the "Hebrew nurse" who would be suitable. This results in Jochebed being paid wages for raising her own child (v. 9).
- Terence Fretheim gives this wonderful explanation to the role of the women in this passage:
  - Consistent with this creation theme is *the role given to the daughter of Pharaoh*. A non-Israelite (add Moses' teachers in Pharaoh's court, Acts 7:22!) contributes in significant ways to God's activity of life and blessing. In fact, her activity is directly parallel to that of God with Israel (2:23–25; 3:7–8)! She "comes down," "sees" the child, "hears" its cry, takes pity on him, draws him out of the water, and provides for his daily needs. Basic human values such as compassion, justice, and courage (cf. 1:12*b*!) as well as the active subversion of cruel and inhumane policies are seen to be present among God's creatures quite apart from their relationship to Israel; such are the product of God's activity in creation.
  - Even more, God's use of the gifts of non-Israelites for creative purposes sets the stage for God's redemptive purposes. In the final analysis, there is no difference in the effect of the humanitarian efforts of those who fear God and those who do not. Both Hebrew midwives and Egyptian princess are agents of life and blessing in the created order. God is able to make use of the gifts of both, and the community of faith is equally accepting of their efforts. Moreover, by telling both stories, Israel acknowledges both contributions with thanksgiving. While the redeemed will be *expected* to engage in acts of justice in view of what God has done for them (cf. 22:21–27), many who are not of this community will engage in such activity with more or less comparable results on the basis of other motivations, prompted by God's creative work within them.<sup>4</sup>

After Moses flees his native land because of fear that Pharaoh will kill him in retaliation for a murder of an Egyptian taskmaster, we find him in Midian at a well. This is a familiar scene that calls us back to the matchmaking around wells of

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<sup>4</sup> Terence E. Fretheim, *Exodus* (Interpretation, a Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching; Louisville, KY: John Knox Press, 1991), 38–39.

Genesis. Moses encounters a “priest of Midian” who we later learn is Jethro, and is given Zipporah as a bride. They have a son named Gershom.

We don't encounter Zipporah again until chapter 4 in one of the strangest stories of the Bible, the so-called bridegroom of blood account. The Hebrew is confusing, but apparently Zipporah saves Moses from being killed by God. The most common interpretation of these verses in Exodus 4:24-26 is that Moses failed to abide by the law of circumcision for his firstborn son Gershom. By violating the covenant, Moses is under threat of death from God. His wife, the daughter of a pagan Midianite priest, performs the circumcision of Gershom and flings the blood on Moses' feet.

Some ancient and modern commentators believe that it was Moses' own failure to become circumcised which occasioned God's anger. Zipporah acted symbolically in circumcising their son, which is a kind of propitiation for Moses. Whatever the meaning, it is clear that Zipporah acts boldly to avert a sudden disaster.

### **Suggestions for further reading:**

Of course, there is no substitute for a deep and close reading of Exodus. I found that pairing my reading with some excellent commentaries brought alive some of the denser material you find in chapters 25-31 and 25-40 (both of which delve into the construction of the Tabernacle and its environs).

I have had many conversation partners during my study of the book of Exodus. Back in October I took a course on Exodus and preaching taught by the President of Northern Seminary, Dr. Bill Shiell. Bill baptized me years ago when I was a young lawyer, returning to faith at First Baptist Church, Knoxville, Tennessee. His book *Sessions with Exodus: Questions God's Children Ask* is excellent. It is designed for group study, but rewards individual reading.

I relied on several commentaries and books to gain insight on Exodus, the most insightful of which have included works by the Jewish scholar Nahum Sarna. His *Exploring Exodus* book is written for a general audience, while his commentary for the Jewish Publication Society is more academic.

Michael Walzer's book *Exodus and Revolution* traces the theme of Exodus through history and the ways in which different political movements have drawn upon the Exodus. Also, the Egyptologist Jan Assmann (unfortunately named, I know) wrote a fascinating book called *The Invention of Religion: Faith and Covenant in the Book of Exodus* which sets Exodus in its historical context in the Ancient Near East.