

((PREACHING *the* WORD))

EXODUS

SAVED *for* GOD'S GLORY



PHILIP GRAHAM RYKEN

R. Kent Hughes

Series Editor

EXODUS

PREACHING THE WORD

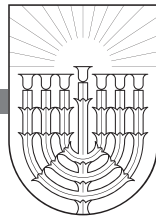
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Exodus

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To

JAMES MAXWELL RYKEN

*who brought joy to his father's heart
while this book was being written—
the whole first three years of his life*

and to the

GREAT GOD OF THE EXODUS,

*who alone can rescue us from the Egypt of our sin,
redeem us by the blood of the Lamb,
and receive us into his everlasting glory*

*“I will get glory over Pharaoh
and all his host,
and the Egyptians shall know
that I am the LORD.”*

EXODUS 14:4

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A Word to Those Who Preach the Word

There are times when I am preaching that I have especially sensed the pleasure of God. I usually become aware of it through the unnatural silence. The ever-present coughing ceases, and the pews stop creaking, bringing an almost physical quiet to the sanctuary—through which my words sail like arrows. I experience a heightened eloquence, so that the cadence and volume of my voice intensify the truth I am preaching.

There is nothing quite like it—the Holy Spirit filling one’s sails, the sense of his pleasure, and the awareness that something is happening among one’s hearers. This experience is, of course, not unique, for thousands of preachers have similar experiences, even greater ones.

What has happened when this takes place? How do we account for this sense of his smile? The answer for me has come from the ancient rhetorical categories of *logos*, *ethos*, and *pathos*.

The first reason for his smile is the *logos*—in terms of preaching, God’s Word. This means that as we stand before God’s people to proclaim his Word, we have done our homework. We have exegeted the passage, mined the significance of its words in their context, and applied sound hermeneutical principles in interpreting the text so that we understand what its words meant to its hearers. And it means that we have labored long until we can express in a sentence what the theme of the text is—so that our outline springs from the text. Then our preparation will be such that as we preach, we will not be preaching our own thoughts about God’s Word, but God’s actual Word, his *logos*. This is fundamental to pleasing him in preaching.

The second element in knowing God’s smile in preaching is *ethos*—what you are as a person. There is a danger endemic to preaching, which is having your hands and heart cauterized by holy things. Phillips Brooks illustrated it by the analogy of a train conductor who comes to believe that he has been to the places he announces because of his long and loud heralding of them. And that is why Brooks insisted that preaching must be “the bringing of truth through personality.” Though we can never *perfectly* embody the truth we preach, we must be subject to it, long for it, and make it as much a part of our *ethos* as possible. As the Puritan William Ames said, “Next to the Scriptures, nothing makes a sermon more to pierce, than when it comes out of the inward affection of the heart without any affectation.” When a preacher’s *ethos* backs up his *logos*, there will be the pleasure of God.

Last, there is *pathos*—personal passion and conviction. David Hume, the

Scottish philosopher and skeptic, was once challenged as he was seen going to hear George Whitefield preach: “I thought you do not believe in the gospel.” Hume replied, “I don’t, but *he does*.” Just so! When a preacher believes what he preaches, there will be passion. And this belief and requisite passion will know the smile of God.

The pleasure of God is a matter of *logos* (the Word), *ethos* (what you are), and *pathos* (your passion). As you *preach the Word* may you experience his smile—the Holy Spirit in your sails!

R. Kent Hughes
Wheaton, Illinois

Preface

A book this long at least deserves the mercy of a short preface. The book itself is based on a series of Bible expositions that were preached before, during, and after the sudden illness and death of James Montgomery Boice, my predecessor in the pulpit of Philadelphia's Tenth Presbyterian Church. I praise God for his faithfulness to us as a church during those difficult days, and for all the love and prayers of our session and congregation. Working through Exodus week by week was a triumphant adventure that brought us closer to the God of the exodus and to his Son, Jesus Christ. My prayer for this book is that it will help others make the same spiritual journey. I wish to give special thanks to Jonathan Rockey for the kindness of reviewing and improving this entire manuscript; to Ted Griffin for his painstaking work as editor; to Lydia Brownback, Ted Griffin, and Pat Russell for the difficult labor of preparing the indexes; to the staff at Crossway for bringing the book into print; and to Kent Hughes for the privilege of contributing another volume to his excellent series of commentaries.

1

Into Egypt

EXODUS 1:1–7



EXODUS IS AN EPIC TALE OF fire, sand, wind, and water. The adventure takes place under the hot desert sun, just beyond the shadow of the Great Pyramids. There are two mighty nations—Israel and Egypt—led by two great men—Moses the liberating hero and Pharaoh the enslaving villain. Almost every scene is a masterpiece: the baby in the basket, the burning bush, the river of blood and the other plagues, the angel of death, the crossing of the Red Sea, the manna in the wilderness, the water from the rock, the thunder and lightning on the mountain, the Ten Commandments, the pillar of cloud by day and the pillar of fire by night, the golden calf, and the glory in the tabernacle.

Once heard, the story is never forgotten. For Jews it is the story that defines their very existence, the rescue that made them God’s people. For Christians it is the gospel of the Old Testament, God’s first great act of redemption. We return to the exodus again and again, sensing that somehow it holds significance for the entire human race. It is the story that gives every captive the hope of freedom. Thus it was only natural for African-American slaves—many of whom were Christians—to understand their captivity as a bondage in Egypt and to long for the day when they would be “free at last.” The exodus shows that there is a God who saves, who delivers his people from bondage.

Exodus and the Bible

The word *exodus* means “exit” or “departure.” It first appears at the beginning of chapter 19: “On the third new moon after the people of Israel had *gone out* of the land of Egypt . . .” (v. 1). When the Hebrew Scriptures were translated into Greek, the verb used for their leaving Egypt was *exodus*. Eventually the word came to be used as a title for the whole book. The exodus, then, is a story of departure, an epic journey from slavery to salvation. As we study this book, the

journey out of Egypt becomes part of our own spiritual pilgrimage. So how shall we make the journey? What is the best way to study Exodus?

First of all, our approach must be *Biblical*, which means that we must study the book of Exodus itself. We must study it chapter by chapter and verse by verse, seeking to understand the plain meaning of the text. And we must study the book as a complete literary whole. Some scholars view Exodus as a complicated web of human traditions that must be disentangled to be understood. Others argue that it is really two books in one. Chapters 1–14 contain the original story of Israel’s salvation, they say, while the rest of the book consists of material that was added later, somewhat haphazardly.

It is probably true that Exodus was not written at a single sitting. Some parts of the book—especially the stories and songs—may have been passed down by oral tradition. Yet much of the epic seems to have been written by Moses himself. On several different occasions, God told Moses to write down his experiences: “Write this as a memorial in a book” (17:14); “Write these words” (34:27). Moses knew how to write, of course, because he had been trained in Pharaoh’s court. So he was able to do as he was told, to write “down all the words of the LORD” (24:4). Some parts of Exodus may have been written down by someone else, especially the parts that describe Moses in the third person. Yet when Jesus quoted from Exodus (e.g., Mark 7:10; 12:26), he attributed what he was quoting directly to Moses, and we should do the same.

The important thing is to receive the book of Exodus as it has been given, which means studying it as one complete story. Like every other book in the Bible, Exodus is the living Word of God. It was breathed out by the Holy Spirit and written down by Moses for our spiritual benefit. What God has given us is not a random collection of documents, but a single book with a unified message.

Taking a Biblical approach also means reading Exodus in the context of the whole Bible, starting with the Pentateuch, “The Five Books of Moses.” Exodus often looks back to the promises God made in Genesis. Whereas Genesis tells of the creation of the world, Exodus recounts the creation of a nation. The book also stands in close relation to the books of Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy. This is how one scholar explains the connection:

In the Pentateuch, considered as a whole, there are only five major themes: God’s promise to the patriarchs; the exodus; God’s Self-revelation in covenant and law at Sinai; the wandering in the wilderness; the entrance into Canaan. Three of these five major themes are treated at length in the book of Exodus and, in addition, it looks back to the first theme and on to the last. Moses’ vision and call at Mount Sinai are deliberately shown as a fulfilment of God’s promise to Israel’s forefathers, while the book ends with a promise of God’s leading till Canaan is reached. Therefore, while Exodus is only part of a wider and far larger whole, it is a real part and, in a sense, enshrines the heart of the whole pentateuchal revelation.¹

Beyond the Pentateuch, the book of Exodus has wider connections with the rest of the Old Testament. The exodus was *the* great miracle of the old covenant. Thus many passages in the Psalms and the Prophets look back to it as the paradigm of salvation. The people of Israel always praised God as the One who had brought them out of Egypt. The New Testament writers worshiped the same God, and thus they often used the exodus to explain salvation in Christ. Indeed, a complete understanding of the gospel requires a knowledge of the exodus. As we study the book of Exodus, therefore, we must follow the Reformation principle of allowing Scripture to interpret Scripture. In some ways the whole Bible is an extended interpretation of the exodus. Thus the way to understand Exodus is to study the book itself, in the context of the entire Bible.

The Exodus in History

Our approach to Exodus must also be *historical*. This book is more than merely a story; it presents itself as history, and thus the only proper way to interpret it is to accept it as a true account of the history of God's people.

Many objections have been raised to the historicity of Exodus. Some of these objections surround the date of the exodus. The Bible says that Solomon began to build the temple in Jerusalem "in the four hundred and eightieth year after the people of Israel came out of the land of Egypt" (1 Kings 6:1). We know that Solomon built the temple in or around 962 BC, which would place the Exodus around 1440 BC. The problem with that date is that it may not fit everything we know about ancient history, either in Egypt or in Israel. Other questions surround the miracles of Exodus. Did the Nile turn into blood? Did the Egyptians lose all their firstborn sons? Still other questions surround the journeys of the Israelites. Did they cross the Red Sea or the Reed Sea? Did they wander around Arabia or travel directly to Canaan?

Adding to the historical difficulties is the fact that Egyptian records make no mention of the exodus. One writer explains that "archaeologists to date have found no direct evidence to corroborate the biblical story. Inscriptions from ancient Egypt contain no mention of Hebrew slaves, of the devastating plagues that the Bible says preceded their release, or of the destruction of Pharaoh's army during the Israelites' miraculous crossing of the Red Sea (or perhaps the Sea of Reeds). No physical trace has been found of the Israelites' forty-year nomadic sojourn in the Sinai wilderness. There is not even any indication, outside of the Bible, that Moses existed."² Some scholars doubt whether Israel was ever in Egypt at all. In the words of one professor, "the actual evidence concerning the Exodus resembles the evidence for the unicorn."³

Some people don't think it matters very much whether the exodus happened or not. The history of Exodus, they say, is "less important . . . than the quest for the moral and spiritual values that we might extract from this biblical story."⁴ This attitude calls to mind a scene from E. L. Doctorow's *City of God* in

which two men are discussing the relationship between God and history. “God is ahistorical,” one of them argues. He then proceeds to ask, “Do you believe God gave Moses the Decalogue, the Ten Commandments, on Mount Sinai?” After thinking for a moment, his friend replies, “Well it’s a great story. I think I’m a judge of stories and that’s a great story.”⁵

It is a great story, one of the greatest ever written. But is it also history? If not—if the exodus never happened—then the book of Exodus has little or no claim on our lives today. If there was no exodus, then there is no reason to believe in a God who has the power to save and no need to obey his commandments. This problem led the Jewish scholar Abraham Joshua Heschel to ask a provocative question: “If Moses . . . failed to find out what the will of God is, who will?” Heschel concluded, “If God had nothing to do with the prophets, then He had nothing to do with mankind.”⁶

The truth is that God had everything to do with the prophets, and because he had everything to do with them, he has everything to do with us. One good reason to believe in the prophet Moses is that the book of Exodus fits everything we know about ancient history. Start with the date of the exodus. It is important to realize that the Israelites did not have an absolute calendar in the time of the patriarchs, and that the Bible’s method of chronological reckoning sometimes involved some approximation. When the Bible says that Solomon built the temple 480 years after Israel came out of Egypt, it may not be giving us a statistic so much as a symbol. Four hundred and eighty is the product of twelve times forty, and forty is the number the Bible uses to represent a generation (e.g., Judges 5:31; Psalm 95:10). Thus 480 may be a round number used to indicate a dozen generations. However, most generations during the Biblical period were only twenty-five years apart, not forty. If there were twelve generations between Moses and Solomon, that would amount to roughly 300 years rather than 480, yielding a date for the exodus around 1260 BC.

A thirteenth-century exodus would fit the historical situation, including the chronology of the Pharaohs. While the Biblical Pharaoh is not named, it is not hard to guess who he might have been. The harsh Pharaoh who first enslaved the Hebrews may have been Seti I (1303–1290 BC). It was during Seti’s reign that the Egyptians began to move their capital downriver to the Nile Delta. This move was significant because it required large building projects—perhaps including the store cities mentioned in Exodus 1:11—in the region where the Israelites are known to have lived (the land of Goshen). Seti was succeeded by Rameses II (1290–1224 BC), who completed the move to the delta, using even more slaves to attempt even more elaborate buildings than his father. It was Rameses who completed the cities of Pithom and Rameses (or Raamses as the ESV has it—presumably the city was named after him).

On the other hand, the arguments for a fifteenth-century exodus are much stronger than is sometimes realized.⁷ If the 480 years are taken as chronologi-

cally exact, then the exodus occurred in 1445 BC, during the reign of Amenhotep II (1453–1425 BC), with Thutmose III (1483–1450 BC) having ruled as Pharaoh for most of Moses’ life. There is substantial evidence that Thutmose, like Seti after him, engaged in major building projects in the Nile Delta. The city of Rameses need not have been named after Rameses II, as some have argued, for the name Rameses was an ancient one. Alternatively, Rameses may have been an anachronism—a name given later to a city built under Thutmose III. But the strongest argument in favor of an early exodus is that the chronological statements in Judges 11:26 (where Jephthah states that it had been 300 years since the conquest of Canaan) and Acts 13:19, 20 (where Paul posits 450 years between the flight from Egypt and the capture of Jerusalem) both support a mid-fifteenth-century exodus.

Like a thirteenth-century date, a fifteenth-century date for the exodus would fit what we know about slavery in Egypt. By the time of Moses there had been Semitic slaves in Egypt for several centuries.⁸ The most intriguing reference to them appears in a text called Leiden Papyrus 348, dating from the time of Rameses II, which contains instructions to distribute grain rations “to the ‘Apiru who are dragging stones to the great pylon.”⁹ Obviously, the ‘Apiru (*hapiru*) were slaves. Some scholars believe that there may be a connection between the word ‘Apiru and the word ‘Ibri (also mentioned in the famous Tell el-Amarna tablets), from which we derive the word *Hebrews*. At the very least, it is historically certain that people of Semitic origin were enslaved by the Pharaohs during the decades leading up to the exodus.

It is also certain that there were Israelites living in Canaan not long afterward. After a lengthy reign, Rameses II was succeeded by Merneptah (1224–1214 BC). The Stele of Merneptah—a seven-foot, black granite monument celebrating Merneptah’s accomplishments—boasts that “Canaan is plundered with every hardship. . . . Israel is laid waste, his seed is not.” That is, Merneptah completely destroyed the Israelites.¹⁰ Obviously, Merneptah was exaggerating because the Israelites outlived him by three millennia. What is significant, however, is that there were enough Israelites in Canaan for him to fight against, proving that by then they had made their exodus from Egypt to the Promised Land. To summarize, either a fifteenth- or a thirteenth-century date for the exodus can be reconciled with the archaeological evidence for the conquest of Canaan, although the balance of the evidence supports the former.¹¹

Apart from the Bible, we cannot prove the historicity of the exodus; however, we can show that it is historically plausible. Several other archaeological discoveries support specific details from the book of Exodus. A text called “The Admonitions of an Egyptian Sage,” also known as the Papyrus Ipuwer, describes a series of disasters that sound very much like the Biblical plagues.¹² Also, a series of Egyptian military outposts has been identified along the coast between Egypt and Canaan. This would explain the logic of 13:17: “When Pharaoh let

the people go, God did not lead them by way of the land of the Philistines, although that was near. For God said, ‘Lest the people change their minds when they see war and return to Egypt.’” All things considered, whether we adopt an early date or a late date for the exodus itself, the archaeological evidence shows that the book of Exodus fits everything we know about the history of Israel in Egypt.¹³

It is true that there is no extra-Biblical record of the exodus itself, but this is hardly a surprise. The Nile Delta—which is where the Israelites were living at the time—is too wet for many documents to have survived. Furthermore, the Egyptians were a proud people who rarely (if ever) mention their disastrous defeats in their own records, which generally read more like propaganda. We could hardly expect them to set up a monument explaining how they lost a full brigade of their best soldiers in a failed attempt to capture runaway slaves! Indeed, the Bible is unique among ancient documents for providing the most unflattering information about the people who wrote it, a fact that has led Professor Nahum Sarna to conclude that the exodus “cannot possibly be fictional. No nation would be likely to invent for itself, and faithfully transmit century after century and millennium after millennium, an inglorious and inconvenient tradition of this nature.”¹⁴ The book of Exodus presents the Israelites as a grumbling, complaining, idol-worshiping people. It does not encourage us to praise the Israelites themselves, but only their God.

Exodus, God, and Christ

This brings us to a third point: Our interpretation of Exodus must be *theological*. As we study the Biblical history in the book of Exodus, we discover that the real hero of the story is God. God is the one who reveals himself to Moses as the Great I AM. God is the one who hears the cries of his people in bondage and takes pity on their suffering, raising up a deliverer to save them. God is the one who visits the plagues on Egypt, who divides the sea, and who drowns Pharaoh’s army. God is the one who provides bread from Heaven and water from the rock. God is the one who gives the law-covenant on the mountain and fills the tabernacle with his glory. From beginning to end Exodus is a God-centered book, a theological history.

To read Exodus, therefore, is to encounter God. The book is about the mercy, justice, holiness, and glory of almighty God, who rules history by his sovereign power and who saves the people of his covenant. When the Biblical writers recall the exodus, they rarely mention Moses at all; instead they speak of the wonders of God. This gives us a hint that the proper way to study Exodus is to pay constant attention to what the book is showing and telling about the character of God. Exodus is an exercise in theology, which is simply the study of God.

If our approach to the exodus is theological, it must also be *Christologi-*

cal. In other words, we must understand Exodus in relation to Jesus Christ. The exodus finds its ultimate meaning and final interpretation in the person and work of God the Son. In one way or another, the whole Bible is about Jesus Christ. The theme of the Old Testament is the Savior to come; the theme of the New Testament is the Savior who has come and is coming again. Yet because Exodus is the gospel of the Old Testament, its connection to Christ is especially strong. Jude went so far as to tell his readers that *Jesus* “saved a people out of the land of Egypt” (Jude 5). The Bible also says that after the resurrection, when Jesus talked with his disciples on the road to Emmaus, “beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, he interpreted to them in all the Scriptures the things concerning himself” (Luke 24:27). If Jesus began with Moses, surely he must have said something about the exodus!

In many ways, the exodus set the pattern for the life of Christ. Like Moses, Jesus was born to be a savior and was rescued from his enemies at birth. He also had a sojourn in Egypt, for it is written, “Out of Egypt I called my son” (Hosea 11:1; Matthew 2:15). Like the children of Israel, Jesus passed through the waters of baptism. Also like the Israelites, who wandered in the desert for forty years, Jesus went out into the wilderness for forty days. Upon his return he went up the mountain to give the Law (Matthew 5–7), much as Moses brought the Law down from Mount Sinai.

There are also many ways in which the death of Christ followed the pattern of the exodus. There is a clue about this in Luke’s account of the transfiguration. Jesus went up to pray on the mountain, where he appeared to his closest disciples in dazzling majesty: “And behold, two men were talking with him, Moses and Elijah, who appeared in glory and spoke of his departure, which he was about to accomplish at Jerusalem” (Luke 9:30, 31). It is significant that Moses was present because the word Luke uses for Jesus’ departure is the Greek word *exodus*. Moses and Elijah were talking with Jesus about *his* exodus. That is to say, they were talking about his crucifixion and resurrection, when he would pass through the deep waters of death to deliver his people from their bondage to sin and take them to the glory-land. This explains why Jesus was crucified at Passover. He was the Passover Lamb (1 Corinthians 5:7) who takes away the sins of the world (John 1:29). Many of the words the Old Testament uses to describe the exodus from Egypt—words like *ransom*, *redemption*, and *deliverance*—are the very words the New Testament uses to describe Christ’s work on the cross.

What all these connections with Christ show is that Exodus is not just *a* story of salvation, but *the* story of salvation. Israel’s deliverance from Egypt anticipated the salvation accomplished once and for all in Jesus Christ.

The last thing to say about our approach to interpreting Exodus is that it must be *practical*. In order for Israel’s journey out of Egypt to become part of our own pilgrimage, we must apply its spiritual lessons to our own daily walk with God. God has given us the book of Exodus, as he has given us every single

book in the Bible, for our practical benefit. When the Apostle Paul wanted to exhort the Corinthians to persevere in the faith, he reminded them of the exodus: “For I do not want you to be unaware, brothers, that our fathers were all under the cloud, and all passed through the sea, and all were baptized into Moses in the cloud and in the sea” (1 Corinthians 10:1, 2). Then Paul drew a connection between their salvation and the salvation we have in Jesus Christ: “[They] all ate the same spiritual food, and all drank the same spiritual drink. For they drank from the spiritual Rock that followed them, and the Rock was Christ” (1 Corinthians 10:3, 4). The Apostle went on to explain how, despite the fact that God saved them in the wilderness, the Israelites turned away from God and perished. He concluded by saying, “Now these things happened to them as an example, but they were written down for our instruction, on whom the end of the ages has come” (1 Corinthians 10:11). In other words, Paul was saying that what happened to them was written down *for us*. Exodus is intended for our spiritual benefit.

Since the exodus is a story of deliverance from bondage through the work of a savior, it is the story of the Christian life. Like the Israelites, although we “were once slaves of sin,” now we have “been set free from sin” (Romans 6:17, 18). As we trace their spiritual journey, we discover that we need exactly what the Israelites needed. We need a liberator, a God to save us from slavery and destroy our enemies. We need a provider, a God to feed us bread from Heaven and water from the rock. We need a lawgiver, a God to command us how to love and serve him. And we need a friend, a God to stay with us day and night, forever.

The God of Israel

It is time to start the journey. Since our method is Biblical, that means starting with the Biblical text. In the opening verses of Exodus we are reintroduced to the twelve tribes of Israel: “These are the names of the sons of Israel who came to Egypt with Jacob, each with his household: Reuben, Simeon, Levi, and Judah, Issachar, Zebulun, and Benjamin, Dan and Naphtali, Gad and Asher. All the descendants of Jacob were seventy persons; Joseph was already in Egypt” (1:1–5; cf. Genesis 46:8–27).

The twelve tribes of Israel are listed in a formal way to indicate that this is the preface to some momentous event. From the very beginning it is apparent that these people have a history and a destiny. Exodus begins the way epics typically begin, in the middle of things, with the adventure already underway. In Hebrew the book begins with the word “and,” which establishes a connection between the exodus and everything that came before. It is a way of saying that Exodus is a sequel to Genesis, another episode in the continuing adventure of God’s people.

Before coming out of Egypt, the sons of Israel had to go there in the first place, and it is worth remembering why they went. How did Israel get into

Egypt? With the mention of Joseph and his brothers, it all comes back to us. Joseph was the first member of the family to enter Egypt. He was the favorite son, the apple of his father's eye, and thus the envy of all his brothers. In a fit of jealous rage they threw him into a pit, sold him into slavery, and took his bloodstained robe back to their father (Genesis 37). Yet in the providence of God, Joseph eventually became the prince of Egypt. When his family later went to Egypt in a time of famine, Joseph was able to give his brothers bread, and the whole family resettled in the Nile Delta. The irony is that eventually the families of the men who sold their brother ended up in slavery themselves, toiling under the hot sun for their Egyptian overlords.

The twelve sons of Israel were never likely to become epic heroes. In fact, the more we know about this family, the more amazed we are that God would have anything to do with them at all. It was not a large family; there were only seventy of them to begin with. They were not very powerful. Joseph had risen to a position of authority, but his office was not hereditary, and the rest of his family were living as strangers in a strange land. They were not especially bright. Certainly they were no more talented than the Egyptians, who built a civilization that could boast some of the world's leading intellects. Nor could this "dirty dozen" claim to be any more righteous than anyone else. Their family history was a sordid tale of treachery, philandering, and violence. Their father Jacob had betrayed his brother Esau by tricking him out of his birthright. Like father, like sons: By getting rid of Joseph, Jacob's boys had tried to deny their father's blessing. The most despicable of all was Judah, who had sex with his daughter-in-law Tamar. The sons of Israel were all sinners—ordinary mortals, as their obituary proves: "Then Joseph died, and all his brothers and all that generation" (1:6).

Joseph and his brothers really had just one thing going for them, and that was their God. What was important about these people was that they were God's people. And what a God they had! Not only was he the God of Jacob, but he was also the God of Abraham and Isaac. He was the God of the everlasting covenant, who turned what they meant for evil—namely, selling their own brother into slavery—into good (Genesis 50:20). He is the same God we will meet throughout the book of Exodus: "The LORD, the LORD, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness, keeping steadfast love for thousands, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin" (34:6, 7). When this great God is on your side, anything can happen! You can pass through the deep waters unharmed, while a thousand enemies are lost at sea and glory blazes from the mountain.

What made the sons of Israel special, however unpromising they may have seemed, was their relationship to God. They had God on their side, with all his promises. He had given the Israelites the most amazing promises ever. In fact, one of them was already coming true: "Then Joseph died, and all his brothers and all that generation. But the people of Israel were fruitful and increased

greatly; they multiplied and grew exceedingly strong, so that the land was filled with them” (1:6, 7). There were only seventy Israelites to start with, but soon the land was filled with them. This was something God had promised when he made his covenant with Abraham: “I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you” (Genesis 12:2a). “I am God Almighty; walk before me, and be blameless, that I may make my covenant between me and you, and may multiply you greatly” (Genesis 17:1, 2). God gave Abraham two great promises—land and seed. The promise of the seed was fulfilled in the opening verses of Exodus, and all that remained was for God to give Abraham’s descendants a land to call their own. Hence his need to get them out of Egypt.

The promise of the seed went back even farther than Abraham, all the way to Adam and Eve, who were commanded, “Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth” (Genesis 1:28). Now God was keeping his promise to turn one family into a mighty nation. Exodus makes this explicit by describing the Hebrew multitudes with the very words (“fruitful,” “multiply,” etc.) used in the creation mandate in Genesis (cf. Genesis 1:21, 22; 9:1–7). In his people Israel, God was fulfilling his plan for humanity. As the psalmist later wrote:

Then Israel came to Egypt;
 Jacob sojourned in the land of Ham.
 And the LORD made his people very fruitful
 and made them stronger than their foes. (Psalm 105:23, 24)

When it comes to the multiplication of the Israelites, some scholars think that the Bible is exaggerating. Niels Peter Lemche claims, “It is generally acknowledged by scholars that the traditions about Israel’s sojourn in Egypt and the *exodus* of the Israelites are legendary and epic in nature. The very notion that a single family could in the course of a few centuries develop into a whole people, a nation, consisting of hundreds of thousands of individuals, is so fantastic that it deserves no credence from a *historical* point of view.”¹⁵ But this is where theology helps explain history. Historically, hundreds of years had passed since the Israelites had entered Egypt (see 12:40, 41)—enough time for a family to become a nation. But the theological explanation for their remarkable growth is that God was keeping his covenant promises. In the Hebrew original, seven different words are used to describe the population explosion, perhaps demonstrating that the multiplication of the Israelites was the perfection of God’s plan.¹⁶ Forever afterward the children of Israel would confess their faith in the power of their promise-keeping God, saying, “A wandering Aramean was my father. And he went down into Egypt and sojourned there, few in number, and there he became a nation, great, mighty, and populous” (Deuteronomy 26:5b).

This brings us to a very practical question: Who is our God? The truth is that we are no better than the sons of Israel. We are envious, ill-tempered people

who stubbornly refuse to follow God. We fail to live up to his perfect standard every day. What we need is the God of Exodus. If he is our God, then he has performed for us a miracle of grace, and we can trust him to save us to the very end.

Saved for God's Glory

We have been saying that the Israelites had only one thing going for them, and that was God himself. What the rest of Exodus shows is that their God had one overriding purpose: namely, to glorify himself. The book of Exodus is so rich that it is hard to reduce it to a single theme or emphasis. Different commentators have made various suggestions about what ties the whole book together, and some have doubted whether there is anything to unify the book at all. However, the theme of Exodus is very simple—so simple it can be expressed in four short words: *saved for God's glory*.

In one sense, of course, God does everything for his glory. In his famous “Dissertation Concerning the End for Which God Created the World,” Jonathan Edwards (1703–1758) wrote, “The great end of God’s works, which is so variously expressed in Scripture, is indeed but ONE; and this *one* end is most properly and comprehensively called THE GLORY OF GOD.”¹⁷ The chief end of God is to glorify himself in all he is and all he does. But this is especially true of the exodus. One of the most glorious things God ever did was to save his people out of Egypt. The exodus was for his glory. As the psalmist wrote, “Our fathers, when they were in Egypt . . . he saved them for his name’s sake, that he might make known his mighty power” (Psalm 106:7, 8).

God makes his glorious purpose known throughout the book of Exodus. Whenever Moses told Pharaoh to let God’s people go, the reason he gave was so they could glorify God. Pharaoh heard it over and over again: “Let my people go, that they may serve me” (e.g., 9:1). But Pharaoh would not let God’s people go. From the human standpoint, this was because his heart was hard. But from the divine perspective, God hardened Pharaoh’s heart so that he could glorify himself. Three times God promised to gain glory for himself through Pharaoh: “And the Egyptians shall know that I am the LORD, when I have gotten glory over Pharaoh, his chariots, and his horsemen” (14:18; cf. 9:16; 14:4, 17; Romans 9:17).

God did gain glory for himself—at Pharaoh’s expense! And as soon as his people escaped from Pharaoh’s clutches, they glorified God. The crossing of the Red Sea was followed immediately by the Song of Moses, in which the people praised God for being “majestic in holiness, awesome in glorious deeds, doing wonders” (15:11). As the Israelites traveled farther into the desert, they saw “the glory of the LORD [appear] in the cloud” (16:10). Finally they arrived at God’s holy mountain, where they again witnessed God’s glory in thunder and lightning (24:15–17). They also heard it in the words of the covenant, which were given to help them glorify God.

Tragically, while the Israelites were waiting for Moses to come back down the mountain, they started dancing around a golden calf. God was so angry with them that he was ready to destroy them. Why? Because although they were saved for God's glory, they were not giving him the glory. But Moses interceded, asking God to have mercy on them, and he made his appeal on the basis of God's glory (32:11–14). If God destroyed the Israelites, Moses argued, then the Egyptians would not glorify him as the God who saved his people. Afterward Moses went back up the mountain, and there he asked to see the glory of God (33:18–23). And see it he did, glimpsing the back of God's glory. When Moses came back down from the mountain, he himself was glorious, radiating with the brightness of God's glory (34:29–35).

The last chapters of Exodus contain detailed instructions for building the tabernacle. Rather than being irrelevant to the exodus, as some have thought, these chapters explain the whole point of the adventure. We are saved to glorify God, which means worshiping him the way he desires to be worshiped. Concerning the tabernacle, God said, "It shall be sanctified by my glory" (29:43). Thus the climax of the whole book comes at the very end: "Then the cloud covered the tent of meeting, and the glory of the LORD filled the tabernacle. And Moses was not able to enter the tent of meeting because the cloud settled on it, and the glory of the LORD filled the tabernacle" (40:34, 35).

From beginning to end, the exodus was for the glory of God. The whole glorious adventure shows that the God of Israel is the God who saves. Anyone who wants to be saved may call on his name and on the name of his divine Son, the Savior, Jesus Christ. This is what the psalmist did at the end of Psalm 106, the "Exodus Psalm." After recounting the entire epic—explaining how God saved his people out of Egypt in spite of their sin—the psalmist invites us to call on God for our own salvation: "Save us, O LORD our God, and gather us from among the nations" (Psalm 106:47a). We do not deserve to be saved from sin any more than the Israelites deserved to be brought out of Egypt. But God saves us for his glory, so "that we may give thanks to [his] holy name and glory in [his] praise," saying, "Blessed be the LORD, the God of Israel, from everlasting to everlasting!" (Psalm 106:47b, 48a).

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